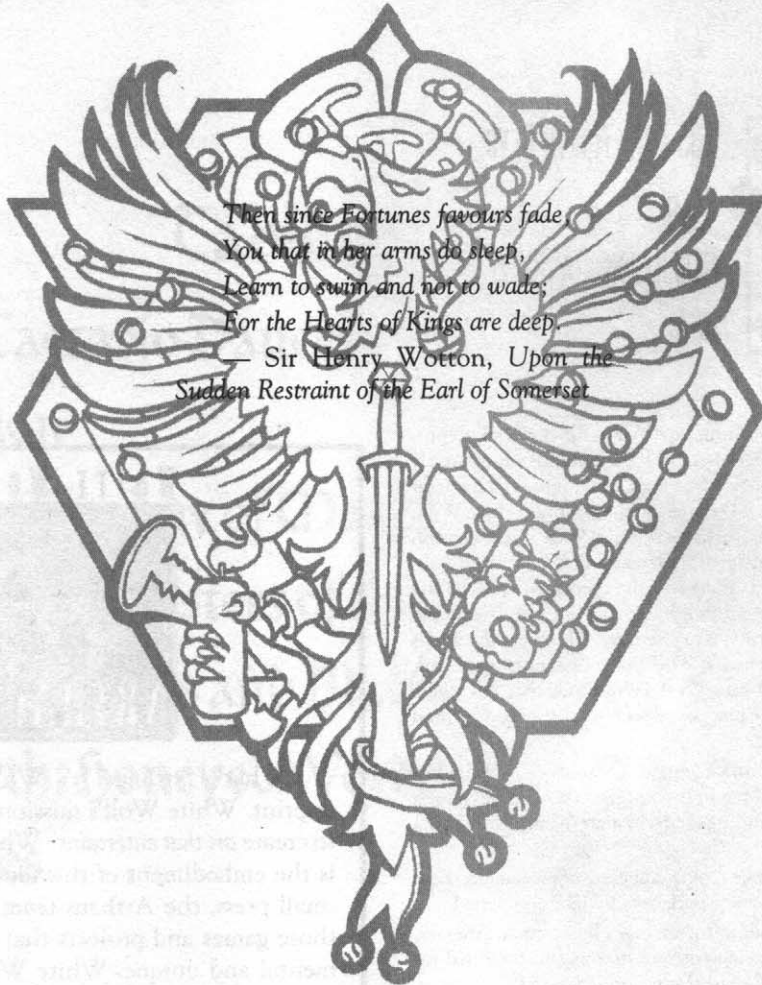


The Tuckler's Wasteland Handbook



High Adventure and Intrigue for
Mage: The Sorcerers Crusade™

The Swashbuckler's Handbook



*Then since Fortunes favours fade
You that in her arms do sleep,
Learn to swim and not to wade;
For the Hearts of Kings are deep.*
— Sir Henry Wotton, Upon the
Sudden Restraint of the Earl of Somerset

Written by Phil Masters, Phil Brucato and Rebecca Moss

Credits

Writing: Phil Masters and Phil Brucato, with Rebecca Moss

Development: Phil Brucato

Editing: Nancy Amboy

Art Direction: Rich Thomas

Art: Dennis Cramer, Jeff Holt, Mark Jackson and Guy Davis

Cover Art: Mark Jackson

Front and Back Cover Design, Layout and Typesetting: Ron Thompson

Sorcerers Crusade Game and Concept: Phil Brucato

Special Note

No kings, queens, spies or bodyguards were harmed during the production of this book. The carpets, however, were irreparably torn and the chandeliers will never be the same again.



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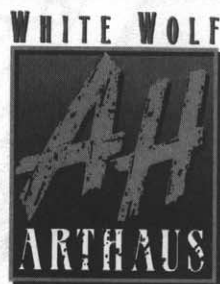
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The Swashbuckler's Handbook

Table of Contents

Prelude: Caesario Dances	4
Introduction	8
Item, First: The Age of Masks	12
Item, Second: Masters of the Danse	40
Item, Third: Hearts and Blades	78
Item, Fourth: Honeyed Words and Bitter Poison	104
Appendices	121

Prelude: Caesario Dances

By Phil Masters

In the midst of a crowded ballroom, lit by a thousand candles, Caesario dances.

Every face in the room wears a mask. Caesario's is of plain black, and his clothes are wild shades of madder-red and sepia brown. But many of the other dancers, alert to style's nuance, have noted that the visiting Fool's clothes are cut at the height of fashion, and seem to be silk, just as his black mask seems to be rich velvet. Perhaps three of the observers sense something "wrong" about that seeming, but none would swear that the clothes are not silk, the mask not best velvet.

In a world where wealth counts for much, but the seeming of wealth counts for much more, Caesario dances.

Caesario has danced with three ladies this evening, and he has been contemplating the question of further partners. Now, however, he is distracted. Something has lodged in the side of his shoe, and it's hardly possible to remove such a thing in public with any grace. Making an excuse, he slips away from the dance and quickly extracts the problem, which proves to be a scrap of parchment. He reads the words written thereon, and does not return to the ballroom.

Most of the men at that dance would be lost in the servants' quarters of this great house, but Caesario has no difficulty finding a staircase. Soon he arrives at the room the note mentioned. Swiftly, he steps inside, closing the door behind him before his eyes adjust to the dim light cast by a single candle. Then, he pauses.

The woman facing him across the room — and across the large, plump bed it holds — wears rich, dark blue satin trimmed with silver thread and narrow bands of lace. The dress is fashionably padded at the hips, and its

neckline cuts interestingly low without being gracelessly flagrant. A dark cat's-mask surrounds her eyes, glittering with tiny beads. However, to Caesario's eyes, the seductive effect of the costume is ruined somewhat by the crossbow the woman holds, pointed at his heart.

"You are changed, Christina," he remarks wryly. "The Florentine street-rat I once knew was content with knives."

"I have never been too proud to learn," Christina d'Aeoli replies, "and I learned months ago that a crossbow is more convincing than a knife, and more tactful than a gun. You, contrariwise, never learn anything. This cannot be the first occasion you have blundered into an ill-chosen bed-chamber."

"True," he says, smiling just a bit underneath his mask. "But my nature has also brought me to a great many pleasant beds. Now, are you done with talk?"

"Not yet." The woman's voice is firm. "I know that you have put much effort into gaining admittance to this house, and the lure of the silly wives of knights has never made you work so hard. Servant-girls are more your level."

"You wound me, my lady."

"Not yet. It's evident that you are here for the sake of your purse, O Noble yet Despicable Fool. I would know who has hired you, and for what."

"Oh, I would venture to guess that we're both seeking the same thing, Milady d'Aeoli." Caesario crosses his arms with a casual air and lounges against the doorway with magnificently counterfeit ease. "But rather than see you disappointed, or have to worry about that crossbow any further, I am prepared to forego my claim."

Christina d' Aeoli does not twitch. "And I should trust you?"

"Think of it as a test. At worst, we are in competition. Besides, you have more of a talent for keeping friends than I, so I deduce that I am likely outnumbered at this feast." Like a cat, he uncoils from his pose against the doorway, eyeing his rival's crossbow and the way the bolt-tip glitters in the candlelight. "Safest I concede this prize, I think, and content myself with the pleasures of the moment..." Caesario smiles charmingly, "...to speak of which — you were never one to risk gloating. If you were going to kill me, I would be dead by now. So you will let me live, and while that holds, I count you friend." He pauses meaningfully, with merely a hint of flirtatiousness. "What say you put that ugly bow aside, old friend, and we delay our return downstairs a little while? We would each know where the other was, so there would be no danger of betrayal."

Christina smiles too, in reply. "You forget — unlike you, I can learn. I've been spending much time at court of late, and I have learned the pleasures of the savored moment. But now I can delay no longer, and you have told me all I need to know."

And with that, she fires her crossbow.

Emerging from the bedchamber a moment later, Christina hides the crossbow behind a wall hanging, then takes a moment to ensure that her dress is arranged correctly. Glancing carefully about, she walks through the corridors of the upper part of the house until she comes to a window she'd noted earlier. There, she pauses and waits calmly. The window overlooks the house's herb-gardens, which are lit, albeit dimly, by a scattering of torches and the candles in the ballroom. That ballroom, in turn, lies directly below Christina's chosen place.

Caesario, meanwhile, swears a series of exotic oaths beneath his breath. The crossbow bolt bears a broad, wickedly barbed head, and has caused considerable damage. Having pierced

the sleeves of both his tunic and under-shirt, the bolt embedded itself in the wooden wall-panel at his back, neatly restraining him while Christina left by the secret door behind her. By the time he tugs himself free, Caesario's sleeves are much the worse for wear. He may be hard-put to avoid criticism if he is seen thus in the ballroom.

Furthermore, he remains uncertain as to Christina's skill (or lack thereof) with the crossbow. It crosses Caesario's mind that his rival would not have cared unduly if the bolt had struck him, rather than merely his clothes.

Still, it did not. In a moment, he is retracing his steps back down the corridor. The strains of distant music reach him, and for a moment, without forethought, Caesario's feet dance a few steps of the fashionable *morisca*. It seems to him that the evening is still young.

The Fool, however, is unprepared for the next problem he encounters. As he stands on the threshold of the ballroom, arranging his arms to hide the rents in his sleeves, Caesario sees a noble reveler — one Lord Delamore by name — striding his way. So far as Caesario can recall, he has never given the man offense, but Delamore's expression has something of that unmistakable, outraged-husband look about it. Further, the nobleman has buckled on his sword, whereas Caesario wears only a dagger at his side.

Caesario swears another muttered oath and turns away, adopting the manner of a dancer strolling out into the garden for some cooler air. He is sure he convinces the few onlookers who notice him, but not, he guesses, the burly swordsman posted in the garden. Evidently, the angry nobleman has sealed this trap with his largest toady.

Caesario saunters up to this new problem wearing his best winning smile, but all he receives in return is a scowl.

"Pardon me, my lord..." he begins, and then, as the man looks back at him blankly, he buries his knee in the fellow's codpiece. The

guardsman grunts, and Caesario follows that blow with a fist to the fellow's nose. Caesario has always prided himself on his uncanny knowledge of the human body; he may be lightly built, but he knows where to strike.

As the bodyguard stumbles, Caesario whips the big fellow's sword from its scabbard. Just in time, he turns around to face the nobleman, who has forgotten his dignity and come on at the charge.

Sword meets sword, once, twice, thrice in succession, before the pair step apart for a moment to reassess each other. Caesario tries another smile.

"Whatever you have heard of me, my lord, I assure you...."

The nobleman steps forward, makes a convincing feint to Caesario's head, then launches a low stroke at Caesario's unprotected leg. The Fool, however, passes back away from the feint (and around the groaning bruiser); in the dim light, avoidance seems to be the best tactic.

"Did I dance with your wife earlier?" he ventures, "if so, I assure you that...."

The nobleman throws a chest-height thrust that Caesario parries. Inwardly, the traveling player groans. His pretty excuses were delivered in a very "special" style, taught him by one of the finest strolling actors (and libertines) in all France. Yet the nobleman ignored them utterly. Caesario sees that he will have to deal with this opponent in the conventional manner.

Fortunately, he's well versed in this art, too. Thus it is that, borrowed blade in hand, on a lawn not made of grass, Caesario dances. Each step he or his opponent takes crushes chamomile beneath their feet, and so their glittering dance is soon engulfed in a soft scent of herbs.

His opponent launches attack upon attack, which Caesario repeatedly sidesteps, until the Fool fights with his back to as much open space as the garden provides. Nimbly

evasive, Caesario begins to retreat before the cold fury of his opponent's blade. At length, he comes to a wall against which climbing roses grow, and then he can retreat no further. As Caesario sidesteps once again, the nobleman's blade cuts rosebuds from their stems.

For a moment, the fighters separate. Caesario drops his guard and breathes deeply. "Can we not talk like sensible men?" he inquires.

Delamore responds with a driving sword-thrust aimed at Caesario's heart. Caesario, who had seen the man's anger growing as his finest attacks were crudely avoided rather than properly parried, slips aside. The noble's sword-point snaps against the brickwork. "I did try to be most reasonable," Caesario says with mock regret as he throws an upward cut to the nobleman's chest. The angry man dodges, but the Fool's sword-point carves a crimson line across the noble's ribs.

"Please let this end our quarrel," Caesario asks with a lightly reasonable voice. "Come inside, good sir. We can have some servant-girl bind your scratch, then share a good strong drink and have a laugh at the follies of all good men."

The nobleman shakes his head, bull-like, and raises his damaged blade. Something distracts him, then, and he glances for an instant towards the house. In that instant, Caesario, who has realized that this fight can only end with a death, drives a simple thrust into the nobleman's heart.

The nobleman gurgles faintly, then drops face-first into the rosebushes. Caesario looks down upon him, wiping his borrowed blade and reflecting that one trained in aristocratic schools of swordplay should avoid fighting in poor light and on the uneven surfaces of lush herb gardens. Then he hears thick footsteps on the lawn behind him, and curses himself. Spinning, he anticipates the toady's dagger coming at his ribs.

For a moment, Caesario is startled when the man stops, twists, and falls ten feet away from him. Then he hears the echo of a gunshot from the direction of the house. Staring into the light, he spots movement in an upstairs window. Then, seeing figures approaching, and knowing how little justice there is for those who slay their betters, he flees into the night.

It's several hours later that he meets Christina d' Aeoli once more. Emerging from the wardrobe where he's been hiding, the Fool who killed "poor Lord Delamore" scowls while full feeling returns to his cramped limbs. Stretching and flexing his tired joints, Caesario slips through the building to the guestroom where the late Lord Delamore had once resided. There, half-hidden once again in dim candlelight, Christina is waiting for him, crossbow in hand.

Now, at last, his smile slips. "I dislike being made your assassin, Milady d' Aeoli," he declares.

"You were never that," Christina replies. "It was most essential that you were nothing of the kind. My Lord Delamore had a taste for amulets of protection, which he thought guarded him against magic, and also warned him of those who sought his life. Unfortunately, he'd found a skilled maker of such toys. Had he ever seen me, he would have known to seek my head at once. Whereas you bore him no malice until he tried to bury his blade in you."

"...And his amulets warned him the moment you aimed your pistol at him, confusing him long enough to hesitate? Oh, very clever, my lady." Caesario's voice drips with sarcasm and faint respect. It had been a good trick, at that. "I doubt that he was hard to provoke against me."

"That's rarely hard with anyone, Caesario." Beneath her blue cat's-mask, she allows herself a smile. "Of course, had I not realized that you neither wanted to take or guard his life, I would have had to let matters run differently — but you let that slip. I saw that you must merely have wanted his latest and most precious purchase." She taps a small oak box on the table before her with a smile. "I think, however, that I will keep that."

"It's hardly yours to keep, my lady." Now, Caesario is smiling again. "You have not looked inside the box. It is not locked."

Christina frowns, carefully directs the box towards Caesario, and throws its lid open. It is indeed empty.

"I ventured in here at the start of the evening, once I saw Delamore was safely down among the dancers" Caesario explains.

"And yet you ventured to the dance, and returned here now...?"

"I always enjoy a dance, my lady d' Aeoli. Ah, well," he sighs, "the searchers will be scattered and tired and easy to avoid by now, so I will depart. And cast aside that frown, sweet Christina — we have both achieved what we most sought this night, save that you still deny my love. Perhaps next time we dance?"

With that, not waiting for a reply, Caesario steps to and leaps out the nearest window, catching the branches of the tall tree growing just outside. Looking upwards as he clammers down, he sees a crossbow bolt bury itself in the branch six inches above his hand.

Christina, he reflects, is indeed a fine shot with that weapon nowadays.

Or that, at least, is what he hopes.





Introduction

Lookes and woordes may be, and oftentimes are, false witnesses.

— Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*



Lord Gaspar wore rich black satin and a doublet of fine calfskin. An intricate pattern of flower motifs wove itself across the leather; in the flickering light of the banquet hall, those flowers caught shadows and sent them skittering across the alchemist's chest.

One spidery hand raised a goblet to the Lord's thin lips, and he took a satisfying draught of the wine before addressing his host.

"I quite sympathize with your difficulties of late, chancellor. In my own province, I had many troubles with the witch-folk and their gypsy cousins for some time. I finally brought the realm under the firm control of Our Lord through some tender ministrations and a not-unfortunate bout of plague." Lord Gaspar met his host's gaze across the broad oak table, and his eyes told far more than his words would do. "I found it most interesting that those who pride themselves so deeply on the arts of healing had not mastered even the most basic forms of hygiene. When the sickness came, it took them down like poisoned rats — due, in no small part, I am certain, to the detestable sties in which they live."

The host, a chancellor of advanced yet vigorous years, had not himself bathed in over a week. But by the standards of the time, his opulent house stood as a testament to cleanliness and splendor. The candelabrae shimmered with fresh polish, and the gold plates glowed like small suns beneath the cooling dinner grease. Silent servants drifted across the scrubbed stone floor like phantoms, always attentive, never intrusive. The man himself held court with easy but complete control. Unlike many noble-

men Lord Gaspar had encountered, this chancellor betrayed very little with either words or gestures. Like a fatted but vigilant tomcat, he watched everything but rarely stirred.

"A wise man," said the chancellor, "never wishes plague, even upon his enemies. Yet when that fell horseman breathes his deadly gift upon the land, better that it should fall on one's enemies than on the innocents entrusted to our care." Gaspar noted the red coral embedded in his host's golden necklace, and the ruby ring that glittered dimly in the candlelight. The chancellor, he noted, was no fool, and understood precautions against poison or plague.

"I understand," the host continued, "that you yourself study sickness, and have turned your not-inconsiderable gifts toward curing fouled humours and deadly airs." The chancellor's voice held a faintly mocking tone, as if to underscore the fact that Gaspar's studies included the brewing of poisons and the breeding of plagues. The alchemist caught the hint, and was admittedly impressed. His deeper studies were not a matter of common knowledge.

"That is true," Gaspar confessed, downing another draught of wine. His own black jet ring darkened one pale and slender finger. "The misfortune of the witch-folk became a boon to my research. I learned a great deal from the plague victims before their eventual demise; in time, I even formulated cures to protect more honest folk from sickness."

The chancellor noted the unspoken offer. "Such protections, I should imagine, are quite expensive."

Lord Gaspar nodded.

"But worth that price."

Lord Gaspar smiled. "To protect one's charges from misfortunes such as this is always worth the price."

Behind Lord Gaspar's chair, a figure waited in the shadows. Blackened steel rested beneath an equally dark cloak, and strange disciplines concealed his presence from the guest. So far, Lord Gaspar had not seemed to notice this assassin, Gareth by name. But the figure stood motionless, even so, waiting for his lord to give a sign that would terminate the conversation.

The sign never came. "Perhaps," said the chancellor, "we should discuss the terms of such arrangements... and talk further of this unfortunate sickness that overwhelmed your enemies..."

Lord Gaspar cocked a brow agreeably.

"...so long as the costs of your research are not too dear, of course."

"I think," said the alchemist, "that we can discuss satisfactory arrangements. As we both know, the cost of science is far lower than the cost of superstition."

The chancellor grinned. "And we are both men of science. Let us speak..." So saying, the host gestured slightly with his goblet. Lord Gaspar returned the salute.

And in the shadows of the banquet hall, Gareth noted his lord's signal. The visitor should not be killed — not yet, at least — but would bear watching. Gareth stifled a surge of disappointment; it would have been a great pleasure to kill the alchemist, and it worried Gareth to hear his lord discuss "purchasing" a sickness. Still, the chancellor had always done well by his retainers, and Gareth felt honor-bound to stand beside his lord.

For now.

But the chancellor, like his guest, would certainly bear watching.

A Rich and Courty Vintage

Treachery, like fine wine, flows freely through the halls of power. And where soft words conspire, sharp steel waits just out of sight, like a dagger beside a goblet of gold. The European Renaissance is a banquet of such delights, and a magus who would share tables with rich and highborn folk had better keep his own wine and daggers close at hand.

Despite the dreariness of the real-life Middle Ages and Renaissance, the era seems hopelessly romantic to modern eyes. The pageantry of bared swords and brocade provides a welcome contrast to the plastic chaos of our everyday lives. By this point, though, we're all too familiar with the usual parade of medieval clichés — the clang of broadswords, the armored knights, the muddied hovel that all Europe became after the fall of Rome. The banquet of courtly adventure, on the other hand, provides wine of a tastier vintage. Although our old medieval standbys still provide plenty of enjoyment, the real fun starts with the

intrigue and high fashion that begin in the Renaissance and carry through into the Age of Reason — with the dance of sharp blades and sharper wits that marks a truly swashbuckling era.

"Swashbuckling" describes an adventure genre epitomized by courtly backgrounds, conspiracy, high stakes, grand style, rapid swordplay, daring deeds, binding honor, and a fair helping of sex (real or suggested). The term comes from the sharp sound of blades against a *buckler*, a small shield preferred by warriors who favor freedom of movement over heavy protection. Thus, "swashbuckler" has romantic connotations of fast fights and flourished bladesmanship. In a wider sense, the image evokes the dance-parry-strike of courtly duels; such duels may be fought with steel, of course, but more often the weapon of choice is a pointed word or stealthy dose of poison. To fight with a buckler, literally or otherwise, one must be fleet, witty and skillful. Broadsword-wielding hulks might dominate the battlefield, but the swashbuckler prefers a more refined arena which allows him (or her) the freedom to close, strike, and dodge away. Hence, a swashbuckler is an adventurer, a daring bravo who trusts his hide to skill and fortune, rather than to dull metal and the whims of Mars.

These swashbuckling adventures have a flavor all their own, a heady mix of style, trickery and graceful violence. Although such adventures can take place anywhere, a true swashbuckler feels at home in and around the court. Any crow-feeder can hack his way across a battlefield, but the delicate gamesmanship and sudden reversals of highborn politics demand quick wits and a ready blade. Eight times out of ten, you can't just haul out a sword and kill someone in a court or manor, so matters must be handled with more... delicacy... than force. Which is not to say that such matters are not deadly. *Au contraire!* Whereas the soldier gambles with his own fate in single combat, the courtier or merchant prince tosses the dice with dozens, sometimes hundreds (occasionally even thousands) of lives. It's not a game for fools or cowards, but can be more rewarding than a pile of gold coins... if you live to collect the reward, that is.

This *rondeau* of treachery and swordplay is not unique to the Renaissance, of course. The dagger-politics of Rome and China and the literally Byzantine affairs of that city belong to earlier eras. But an unprecedented combination of art, commerce, technology, religious conflict, moral and sexual license, political intrigue and magickal skullduggery sets this age apart. The Borgias, the Medicis, the Order of the Dragon and the affairs of merchant-princes keep the courts and graveyards full; affairs of the heart, the throne, the purse and the chapel turn Christian gentlemen (and ladies!) into back-stabbing fiends. Add the secret rivalries of the Traditions and Conventions, the hidden lodges and the black magic cults, and you have a simmering brew of delicate terrors.

So how does one *run* these damn stories? All roleplayers are familiar with the conventions of sword and shotgun, but how in the bloody hell does a 20th-century gamer invoke the treacherous pastimes of 15th-century princes? And how does a Storyteller draw her players, often sated by orc gizzards and machine-gun battles, into the genteel tigerdance of masqued balls and stolen kisses?

That's what **The Swashbucklers Handbook** is all about.

How to Use This Book

Although huge slabs of the **Sorcerers Crusade** rulebook emphasize the social side of the Dark Fantastic world, and whole groups (most notably the Ahl-i-Batin, High Guild and Ksirafai) are dedicated to magickal guile, most of us are so used to raw physical violence (at least in gaming) that it's often hard to plan a story that doesn't involve wholesale slaughter... or at least large amounts of collateral damage. We want, in this book, to show Storytellers and players how to run chronicles in which a poisoned cup is just as fearsome as a fireball — and often far more effective in the long term. We want to inspire our audience to think outside the usual plotlines and head-on tactics of conventional fantasy gaming, to add a bit of treachery's fine wine to the ale of common ass-beating.

Which is not to say that physical violence *doesn't* play a part in a swashbuckling game — quite the opposite. As anyone who's seen the dueling scenes in *Dangerous Beauty*, *Rob Roy*, Zefferelli's *Romeo and Juliet* or the Michael York version of *The Three Musketeers* can attest, swashbuckling violence is more graceful and dramatic than any massed cavalry charge. (If you haven't seen these films yet, rent them ASAP; if you have, rent 'em again.) The dawn of fencing has only just begun, but the slim-sword style is beginning to catch on, especially in places and situations where a broadsword would be *most* awkward. Add magick to metalsmithing, fighting techniques and physical prowess, and you have a graceful, unpredictable yet utterly ruthless art of war.

Oh, yes; and don't forget about sex. This is the heyday of mistresses, courtesans, Papal orgies and demonic seducers. With the rise of fashion and luxury and the collapse of medieval austerity, the Renaissance provides a heady playground of masques, revels, Black Masses and backroom fornication. Art and artifice conspire to make passion a virtue, and countless people respond.

The swashbuckler's table has plenty of room for women, too. Although men rule the battleground of brute force, women call the shots in the bedroom; in many ways, this new libertinism allows women several avenues of power. And they take them: From Lucrezia Borgia to Veronica Franco, many ladies choose passion over chastity, and profit from it. By weaving a thread of temptation, a stitch of betrayal, a cloth of guile and filigrees of ruthlessness (and perhaps some magick to sweeten the design), a woman can wrap a whole stable of men around her fingers — and look damned good doing it! For those women who would rather gut a man than seduce him, the deadly fighting arts, poisons, enchantments and betrayals of the setting offer a strong woman a fighting chance against her rivals. Some disguise themselves as boys and master forbidden skills; others simply say "To Hell with convention" and prove themselves any man's equal — or better! — by sheer determination.

In short, swashbuckling is all about being graceful, stylish, clever and deadly. And what roleplayer isn't interested in *that*?

Like a treatise on courtly etiquette, our **Handbook** is divided into the following chapters:

- Many people (even gamers) have an image of the Renaissance as a poofy-sleeved extension of the Middle Ages. That impression is hardly true. **Item, First: The Age of Masks** describes the maze of history and behavior that defines the swashbuckler's stomping grounds, and addresses the flamboyance and high spirits of the next several centuries.
- To play a game, one must have players. **Item, Second: Masters of the Danse** offers a selection of factions and character-types (for Storytellers and players alike) that befit a swashbuckling adventure.
- **Item, Third: Hearts and Blades** describes *Ars Cupiditae*, the magickal-philosophical discipline mastered by courtiers of an Enlightened bent, and details the tools and enchantments employed by such agents.
- In **Item, Fourth: Honeyed Words and Bitter Poison**, we examine the classic bits and courtly plots that give a swashbuckling adventure its special flavor.
- Finally, several **Appendices** detail a selection of stunts, weapons, courts, gatherings, and inspirational sources for your gaming pleasure.

Enjoy the banquet. Just be careful of the wine....





Item, First: The Age of Masks

*Dazzled thus with height of place,
Whilst our Hopes our wits Beguile,
No man marks the narrow space
'Twixt a Prison and a Smile.*

— Sir Henry Wotton, *Upon the Sudden
Restraint of the Earl of Somerset*

The chancellor's chambers nestled in a part of the castle Maria had never visited before — she was, after all, still new in this service. Her directions to them, though, were clear enough. Ghostlike, she slipped into the room and placed the goblet on a table by the old man's left hand. She had never been this close to him before, either, but she was careful to do no more than glance at him as he looked at the goblet and nodded acknowledgement.

She was nearly out of the door when he spoke.

"Wait, girl."

She could've pretended to have missed the command; he had not raised his voice. It would have been the wisest reaction. Later, she would puzzle over to why she stopped and turned.

"My lord?"

"You are new, are you not, girl? By what name do you go?"

"Maria, my lord."

The old man smiled slightly and nodded again. Then he reached out, and took up the goblet, raising it to his lips....

...And taking only the smallest possible sip before he set it down.

"Ah. Hemlock" he said with another smile, "I suppose that's a jest — and false garlic, and belladonna... Hold her, Gareth."

Again, the old man had not raised his voice; nor had Maria heard anyone else enter the chamber. But as she turned to flee, she found herself facing a muscular young guardsman who was blocking the only door. He caught her one-handed, twisting her 'round to face the chancellor again. In the next moment, she felt the tiny, cold touch of a dagger point at her throat.

(She would have avowed that the guard had been empty-handed when she faced him.)

"I suppose that I should be grateful that it is only the Verbena who want me dead," the old man continued, "or perhaps that cup was merely a warning...." He noted her expression: "Don't look so surprised, girl, there are a dozen good texts on your sisterhood and their manner of work in my library. As a matter of fact, I thought you might be some unexpected agent until I saw your face just now. Anyway, as I was saying,

I should be glad that it is not the Golden Chalice that wishes me harm. They know how to make a taste of wine dangerous."

He sat back in his chair, fingering the stem of the goblet. "Now, what next...? Oh, take her outside and let her go, Gareth."

Maria was too stunned even to think of struggling until she found herself pushed through a side-door and into the castle's kitchen garden. Then, her arms suddenly free, she spun on her heel to face the guardsman. His knife had still been at her throat until the second before, but now it had vanished again; now he stood empty-handed, arms folded, looking at her and smiling slightly.

"Why did he let me live?" It felt like a foolish question as she spoke it, but it was also all she could think to ask.

"Do you know," the guardsman — Gareth — replied, "I was wondering that myself."

The Swashbuckler's World

Danger, the spur of all great minds.

— George Chapman, *Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*

The Renaissance begins the Age of the Swashbuckler. It's not that this era invented deadly politics or flamboyant fighting styles; Ancient Rome and China saw plenty of daggers in rulers' backs, Byzantium was literally a by-word for complex intrigue, and the courts of the Eastern sultans actually institutionalized such conflicts. It's simply that Renaissance Europe epitomizes such things in the eyes of modern audiences, and to a large extent in fact, too. No other historical period makes courtly game-plots of blades, poisons and persuasions seem so appropriate.

A Slow but Steady Fire

This may seem doubly surprising because Europe was, until recently, perhaps the most crass and barbaric region in the world. After the fall of Rome, much of the continent was dominated by more or less tribal powers, and the mead-halls of their chiefs were ruled by blunt words and uncomplicated honor. To be sure, Dark Ages Europeans were vigorous and dynamic enough, and often courageous and honorable, while their leaders and traders could be as cunning and sharp-witted as anyone. But grace and subtlety were often lost in the face of life-and-death issues. Even when smart, determined kings such as Charlemagne united tribal lands, things changed little; most of the courtiers of this era were illiterate, save for a few specialist priests and clerks.

Tribalism turned to feudalism as local chiefs swore to protect their people in exchange for loyalty and support,

Chivalry and Courtly Love

The Renaissance is a time of transition for Europe; the "old ways" are changing, but remain strong in some areas. Among these aging institutions, the medieval aristocratic ideals of *chivalry* and *courtly love* prevail, especially among the upper classes.

"Chivalry" originally referred to the professional code of the wandering cavalry soldier, and was probably as rough and ready as any mercenary business ethic. Sensible freelance warriors were careful not to betray their followers, usually refrained from killing fellow mercenaries unnecessarily, and probably claimed to have a basic set of professional standards; still, their manners and morals would have been shaky at best. Once the troubadours — the court entertainers of the day — got hold of the word, however, it was twisted into something less realistic. Military discipline became formal politeness; the need to treat followers decently became an absolute sense of duty to underlings; lip service to the Church became unwavering piety; and adventures on the Muslim and Pagan frontiers became religious devotion. Naturally, once the poets and singers started spreading such ideals, knights and lords started claiming to live up to them. Some even meant to.

At the same time, the troubadours created the most intensely romantic love-literature in history. With lords away on campaign or visiting remote estates for weeks or months at a time, their wives and daughters often had to deal with visiting knights. Sometimes, these relationships remained impeccably moral; at other times, courts were the scenes of seductions and adultery. Meanwhile, crusaders returned from the East with versions of old Persian and Arab love poetry; these rapturous works espoused an ideal of abject devotion to the loved one. The idea of the enclosed Muslim harem was not imported at the same time, however, so the love poetry remained quite out of context.

Eventually, the ideal of courtly love grew quite bizarre; lovers were supposed to swoon with desire for one another while avoiding any true physical consummation of that desire. Tokens of affection were often exchanged, but kisses were rarely allowed. Sex, the impure fruit of lust not true love, was left for marriage (which remained a much more pragmatic, even businesslike, arrangement). Dante's worship of his Beatrice presents the culmination of this ideal. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere (spread by Sir Thomas Malory, a convicted rapist) is the best-known tale of courtly infatuation, although the ideals were spoiled somewhat by the presence of actual adultery.

To the Renaissance gentleman, these ideals are quite old-fashioned, but not without value. Miguel de Cervantes may eventually parody chivalry in *Don Quixote* (which shows how impractical the whole idea is), but not even he can destroy it. Courtly love can be adapted into the simpler romanticism that will survive into the 21st century in countless poems, novels, and movies. "Chivalry," the wandering mercenary's creed, will become the word for a proper gentleman's behavior; polite and honorable, the chivalrous man protects his inferiors (including women), respects his betters, and shows mercy to all but the most loathsome of adversaries.

making themselves into knights and the common folk into serfs and villeins. This system enabled knights to purchase better weapons, and to gain overwhelming advantages in battle. Of course, knights could play serious politics, too, and they had their own romantic culture of courtly love and complex honor. But their political methods were usually quite blunt, and left little room for grace or subtlety.

In the Renaissance, however, matters are changing. Trade is expanding; serfdom is disappearing from most lands; secular lords can read well enough to enjoy poetry and romances; visual arts and architecture are bursting out in gorgeous revolt; old religious ideas are being challenged; and swords are changing from the heavy hacking broadsword to the nimble fencing rapier. All this transition is chancy and dangerous, but even peasants may hope to change their station, or even the world. And politics and courtly life are changing too. When rulers are no longer quite so certain of their divine authority, and wealth is falling into new hands, power games can get a lot more complicated.

Technology, especially the bloody craft of warfare, plays a large part in this transformation, of course. The longbows of Wales and England, the pikes of Switzerland, and the cannon of Germany all demonstrate that the dominance of the feudal knight is ending; thus, the balance of power shifts and twists. The new age is also marked by new technologies of peace — not least the printing press, which spreads ideas (both old and new) far more widely than hand-copied manuscripts ever could have done. (In the Dark Fantastic world, the Craftsmen, Celestial Masters and Artificers have scored several other coups — including Skyriggers, Abundanti's Oil, reliable firearms, and other innovations — that will utterly disrupt the *status quo*.) Crucial trade routes have been made safer, so wealth flows through European civilization like sap to the highest branches of a growing tree. Newly rich lords and merchants seek out new and more-conspicuous styles of consumption, so court fashion favors grace, style, and innovation. Even the horrendous plagues of recent centuries have had complex consequences; these horrors shattered the old order and reduced trade severely for generations, but this disruption forced the survivors to reorganize their world.

On the southeastern edge of Europe, the old Byzantine Empire finally falls. Waves of refugee scholars spread from the wreckage, bearing new ideas and old texts; meanwhile, the victorious Turks actually prove a wealthy, stable trading-partner for the Mediterranean's merchants. (They also police the eastward trade routes efficiently.) Too strong to challenge on their own ground, the Ottomans spell the end for the old dream of crusading to the Holy Land, thus forcing European rulers to focus on their home territories instead. Beyond the Turks, waves of nomadic conquerors sometimes make travel perilous, but eventually they too serve to make trade safer, when it occurs to certain tribal

leaders that *taxing* traffic is more profitable than simply raiding it.

But this new era, and these new intricacies of courtly life, begins in a land where secular and theological authority, scholarship and wealth all converge....

The Italian Renaissance

The Italian region has several advantages in this era: it commands most travel routes between southeast and northwest; it hosts the seat of supreme power within the Catholic Church; and it has traditions of art and scholarship dating back to Imperial Rome. Despite repeated sackings and centuries of decay, Italy has also remained somewhat urbanized since the Roman period. Knights and merchants are used to living and working alongside each other in the towns, unlike in other parts of Europe where the knights dwell in the country. But above all other factors, one apparent weakness makes this land the natural home for swashbuckling adventure tales: Italy is divided and disorganized.

Not since the Roman Empire have the Italian States known a common ruler. Indeed, some of them are not kingdoms at all, but republics or unstable autocracies. None of them are democracies as later ages would recognize the word — factions and cliques control their governments, and rulers usually hold their offices for life — but they *do* offer lowborn families the chance to rise to power. The Medici, for example, wealthy merchants descended from Tuscan peasants, often control Florence. Conversely, Venice, a power built on control of routes to the east, is ruled by an intricate and secretive oligarchy of old families who conspire to elect the all-powerful Doge from among their number. This Doge, in turn, makes deals with anyone — even the Turks — if he thinks the city will prosper from it. And then there are the Papal States, governed (at least in theory) by the Pope. And while all Christendom enjoys the impression that the Pope is God's saintly chosen representative, most Renaissance Popes are worldly at best, often pragmatic to the point of ruthlessness, and sometimes (as in the case of Alexander VI), utterly corrupt.

For these competitive rulers, power and sophistication are marks of true achievement. And nothing announces power and sophistication quite like your very own stable of artists and philosophers. Thus, the Italian princes excel at patronage; under their reigns, cities like Venice, Florence and Rome become beacons to artists and scholars of all kinds. With ancient ruins to inspire architects and engineers, and numerous scholars — monks, priests, Byzantine exiles, Jews, even Arabs — working through old Greek and Latin texts, Italian culture flares into the brightest fire since the glory days of Rome. Meanwhile, the city-states develop subtle arts of statecraft, and settle some of their political questions with daggers... and worse.

The magickal politics of the region are nearly as labyrinthine as its mortal affairs. Italy's occult associations precede the Roman Empire, and the magickal societies across the land flourished even during the Dark Ages. Shadow-conflicts like the War of Hermes, the Mercy Schism and the Lodge Wars of Tuscany have kept relations between Italian mysticks... interesting. Add the long regional histories behind Daedalean sects like the Collegium Praecepti, Mithraic Singers and Cabal of Pure Thought, the frequent resurgence of Roman Paganism, and the miracle-workers (and Inquisitors) of the Catholic Church, and you have a rich patchwork of intrigues.

As the Ascension War begins to boil, magi of all factions vie for control of the various city-states. Rome, in particular, has become a prize worth killing for; now, with the mounting corruption within the Vatican, diabolists and Infernal wizards dig their claws into the pie as well. Meanwhile, the art-and-science revolution energizes visionaries of all kinds. The High Guild and Artisans might seem to enjoy an obvious advantage in Italy, but the Chorus, Hermetic Houses and Solificati have long histories here, too.

Despite the constant struggling, however, no single faction has the upper hand in Italy. Church-affiliated magi command the most influence, of course, but neither the Chorus nor the Cabal truly "owns" the Vatican and its affiliates. This is not for lack of trying, though; in the name of Christ, an awful lot of blood — Awakened and otherwise — stains the holy floors. Torn between these vicious power-games and the grand blaze of Renaissance art, the magi of Italy live in the most *interesting* of times....

The Ideas Spread

Not that Italy is the only wealthy, dynamic region in Europe. The land of Flanders, for example, is a prosperous cloth-producing center and a crossroads for trade between south and north, England and the Continent. Although feudal aristocrats rule the kingdom, Flanders' cities largely govern themselves. The greatest of them, Bruges, is producing whole new forms of culture — for example, oil painting. While Italian artists mostly paint frescos — applying pigments to still-damp plaster on fixed walls — the artists of Bruges create portable *canvases*.

Meanwhile, the rest of Western Europe is dragging itself out of the Middle Ages....

England

The Hundred Years War between England and France finally ends in 1453, though both nations find themselves with quite enough problems at home. England soon plunges into the Wars of the Roses — a prolonged struggle for the throne between the houses of York and Lancaster. This confused conflict sees periods of peace, apparent victories for both factions, and much betrayal and treachery on all

sides. Matters are only resolved in 1485 when the Lancastrian Henry Tudor defeats and kills the Yorkist Richard III, is crowned Henry VII, and founds the Tudor dynasty. Even then, though, Henry marries a Yorkist princess, and still has to put down Yorkist uprisings.

Over generations, the Tudors create a sophisticated Renaissance court — one that sees a fair amount of great art and a lot of vicious power-politics, betrayal and backstabbing as the monarchs assert their dominance over the fractious feudal lords. Eventually, King Henry VIII and his daughter Queen Elizabeth combine England's established international wool trade, and growing cultural and military might with a tradition of seafaring that will eventually make it a world power. Sadly, Henry also breaks with Rome and establishes himself as the head of the Anglican Church. This leads to centuries of round-robin religious slaughter, wherein Catholics and Anglicans take turns burning one another for heresy — and playing Catholic and Protestant nations against each other in a series of "holy wars" across Europe and the New World.

The fires are kindled for other faiths, too. Although the English do not traditionally burn witches (contrary to popular belief), the Scots and Irish do... sometimes for apparently good reasons! For even after General Windgarde's crusade has failed, the night-war between Pagans and Christians attains a savage pitch in the outlying lands. As King Henry VIII dissolves Catholic holdings and disperses Church clergy, some miracle-workers look for scapegoats to blame. The Pagan holdovers are only too willing to play that part; their occasional raids and wild celebrations spit right in the face of Christian magi. And so the fighting goes on, and on, and on....

Meanwhile, Hermetic wizards and Daedaleans shift back and forth between uneasy compromise, truce, and open warfare. As far as some magi and philosopher-scientists are concerned, England's future lies within the minds of its students and artists. And so, both sides court favor with lords and ladies of all stations, and seed ideas within universities, palaces, and drawing rooms across Britain.

The real conflicts, however, rage between loyalists of the different English noble families. The Wars of the Roses cut through Daedalean and Council ranks alike, frequently pitting "allies" against one another while linking old foes. When (or if) the House of Tudor wins, resentments simmer in Covenants and lodges across the kingdom. Meanwhile, independent magi simply keep their heads down and defend their ancestral holdings. Despite Britain's apparent "unity," the sorcerers within that nation are anything but united.

France

Across the Channel, King Charles VII, victorious over the English, brings in new taxes to finance the government he needs to run a united country, and sets up a standing army to defend it. Old, untrustworthy nobles are moved

ITEM, FIRST: THE AGE OF MASKS

aside. His son Louis XI, inheriting the kingdom in 1461, proves harsh and ambitious, throwing France into a cycle of intrigue and threatened revolt. Louis's own son, Charles VIII, seems weak and unintelligent, but he proves determined to invade Italy and claim the throne of Naples. This leads to 50 years of warfare that spreads carnage across Renaissance Italy, costs France a fortune, and achieves nothing permanent.

Meanwhile, the ever-more-powerful (and staunchly Catholic) French nobles eventually become embroiled in bloody battles with Huguenots — Protestants among their own population. Queen Catherine di Medici, descendent of the Florentine family, rules as regent for her young sons from 1560 to 1589; she holds her position with political skill and bloody ruthlessness, the latter culminating in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. Once again, these Christian-against-Christian intrigues lead to scattered revolts, uprisings, heretic-burnings, and outside conflicts for centuries to come.

Although France technically wins the Hundred Years War, most of its battles are fought on French soil. The endless parade of slaughter, looting, pillage and devastation make the land a breeding ground for chaos. During the course of the conflict, several diabolist cults and bands — most notably the savage *Jacquerie* mercenaries (see **Infernalism: The Path of Screams**, pp. 24, 62-63, 93, 98-99) — nest in the ruins and begun to spread. The Crays and

courts they establish vie with ancient Hermetic Covenants and the Daedalean White Towers of Yoassmy and Languedoc. As France ascends toward the grand power it will embody over the next three centuries, the kingdom hosts another endless conflict: the early skirmishes of the Ascension War.

Spain

Spain, too, is emerging from chaotic civil wars. Indeed, until 1479, Christian Spain is split in two halves, Aragon and Castile; only when they are united by marriage do the joint "Catholic Monarchs," Ferdinand and Isabella, begin to reduce the power of the nobility. They also plot the conquest of Granada, the last vestige of the old Muslim kingdoms that had ruled parts of Spain for centuries.

With the large Muslim and Jewish populations in the Christian kingdoms, Spaniards live in the most religiously diverse society in Western Europe. However, precisely because of this diversity, many Spanish Catholics consider themselves a staunch bulwark against Muslim incursions. Hence, the Spanish Church grows ever more fanatical. Playing on this zealotry, the Catholic Monarchs eventually institute the Spanish Inquisition under Tomás de Torquemada. Together, the monarchs and their servant persuade the Pope to grant considerable religious power to the Inquisitorial Office, which reports only to the crown. Eventually, to defend Catholic purity from dangerous new



ideas, Spanish kings will prohibit their subjects from studying at foreign universities. Thus, although Spain eventually develops one of the finest armies in Europe, engages in military adventures across the continent, and creates a huge, wealthy empire from the discoveries of Spanish-sponsored explorers like Christopher Columbus, the nation will always remain slightly detached from the Renaissance.

This does not, however, make the region a backwater. Quite the opposite. Under the firm hands of the Catholic Monarchs, the Gabrielites enjoy their greatest strength in Spain. Likewise, the overseas ambitions of Portugal and Spain provide the Celestial Masters and Explorators with endless resources and opportunities. Meanwhile the forced conversions and exile of Spanish Jews compel the Lions of Zion to protect their people, or to safeguard Jewish passage into safer lands. On the other side of the Catholic/Jewish divide, the Choeur Cèleste suffers horrible losses during the Spanish Inquisition. The rather... progressive... perspective endorsed by the Tradition is utterly heretical by the Inquisition's standards, and far too many Choristers make one-way trips to the dungeons and pyres.

Overseas, the Spanish and Portuguese Daedaleans enjoy their greatest triumphs; through their efforts (with a little mortal help, of course), the two kingdoms are soon enriched beyond all previous measures. Sadly, the "adventures" in the "New World" across the ocean also mark one of the greatest tragedies in the Order's history — the virtual extermination of hundreds of native cultures. The guilt for that deed, however, will not settle on European shoulders for some time to come. Throughout the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration, the Iberian Peninsula shines like a diamond in the Order of Reason's crown.

The Holy Roman Empire

North of the Alps, the Holy Roman Empire, a sprawling confederation of duchies and principalities, controls most of Germany and many neighboring areas. The seven "electors" — the Archbishops of Trier, Mainz, and Cologne, the Duke of Saxony, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, the Margrave of Brandenburg, and the King of Bohemia — decide who should be Emperor when one is required. Although this divided realm appears to resemble Italy's fractured state, the Empire features strong trading-cities such as Bruges, or the Baltic ports that make up the Hanseatic League; thus, local politics and culture are markedly different. Each prince, duke, or prince-bishop is a feudal lord in his own domains, often imposing heavy taxes on his citizens or at border-posts. Several successful merchant houses establish themselves as princes in their own rights, too; from these groups, like the Fuggers of Austria, the High Guild builds a firm foundation in Western Europe.

At the same time, the religious atmosphere of the Empire darkens. The strong influence of the Catholic Church is

shaken by a series of reformers (or heretics, depending on your viewpoint) like Jan Hus, Martin Luther, and a slew of downright atheistic Humanist writers. (See Item, Third for details.) Across the Empire, resentment against the Roman Church grows, fueled by high tithes (religious taxes), indulgences (blessings and prayers "up for sale"), printed bibles (which allow any literate person to read scripture for himself), and a rising disgust for the distant masters of Rome. In time, skirmishes between Catholic loyalists and nascent Protestants weaken the Church's tenuous hold on the region. The bloody Pagan campaigns of Baerwald and Tezghul the Insane (*The Sorcerers Crusade*, pp. 56-57) add tinder to the flames. All of this, in turn, inspires religious zealotry that culminates in the most severe witchcraft purges on the continent — and an eventual break with Catholic Rome.

Thus, court politics in the Empire have more of an old-fashioned, medieval flavor than those of Italy; the periodic elections of a new Emperor create games played for especially high stakes, in which only the very rich and powerful can enter. With some German provinces ruled by "prince-bishops" — churchmen with secular power — the line between religious and mundane government grows blurry indeed. When a Hus or a Luther triggers religious conflict (let alone when an Infernal horde erupts out of the forests), matters can become very messy. The Kingdom of Bohemia (later, part of Czechoslovakia), Hus's homeland, is wracked by religious wars until 1436, and the Protestant Reformation triggered by Luther's rebellion against Rome leads to decades of conflict in the 16th century, culminating in the devastating Thirty Years War (1618-1648).

Not that the Empire is completely uncivilized; when the Renaissance finally arrives in these parts, Germans produce art, architecture and philosophy that can rival the Italians themselves. Unlike the Italians, however, the German folk do *not* identify with the glories of Rome. Their heritage is bolder, more direct and often far more Pagan. The Italian Renaissance inspires colorful finery; the German one inspires gothic splendor.

This Germanic Empire has other shadows, too. Even under firm Catholic and Protestant governance, the Teutonic lands shelter secret Pagan enclaves, legacies that not even the greatest bonfires can annihilate. The Verbena and Hermetic Traditions maintain strongholds in the Empire, while strange Disparates and Infernal cultists share the dark forests with wolf-folk, and the mountains with castles full of vampire lords.

To counter these shadows, the Order of Reason stakes powerful claims within the Empire, too. German Artisans, Craftsmasons and Gabrielites reinforce un-Awakened knights and gunsmiths; German Cosians establish several large hospitals, and provide relief from plagues and famine; the High Guild cultivates its holdings here, too, and these Guildsmen are considered some of the best in the business. What German Guildsmen lack in subtlety, they make up for in determina-

tion. Such masters wield their money like a large, blunt weapon, with a little more force and a lot less finesse. Every so often, these tensions erupt into open warfare, like the Vienna War or the campaign to stop Tezghul's horde (*Sorcerers Crusade*, p. 56). Despite the strength of their opponents, the Daedaleans often come out on top in such engagements; these victories, combined with the massive witch-hunts that engulf the German States after the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum*, make the Holy Roman Empire into a stronghold of the Order.

The Rise of the Habsburgs

By 1496, the Habsburg family has acquired a lock on elections to the Empire's throne through bribery, threats and raw power. Habsburgs also control additional lands by marrying into the family of the Dukes of Burgundy. In that year, the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian engineers the marriage of his son Philip to Joan, heiress to Spain — a political masterstroke that brings much of Europe under Habsburg domination. Not that this power is quite as absolute as it sounds; too many other kings feel threatened and react accordingly. The Habsburgs, controlling both the western Mediterranean and the eastern borderlands of central Europe, also find themselves on the front lines in confrontations with the great threats to Europe: the Ottoman Turks in the Balkans (and their corsair minions at sea) and the nomadic hordes that sometimes erupt out of Asia. Thus, many 16th-century courtly plots are likely to resolve around attempts to moderate, or reinforce, Habsburg power as the dynasty becomes a major force in European history.

On the Borders of Christendom

Courtly life on the edges of Europe is rarely as sophisticated and subtle as in the heart of the Renaissance world, but it's no less dangerous. In fact, in many places, it's dark and brutal by any standards.

Ottomans and Their Enemies

With the fall of Byzantium, Europe finds itself facing an ever-more-dangerous enemy to its southeast, and the struggle against the power of the Ottoman Turks grows bitter. Ironically, as recently as 1402, the Turks had been shattered by defeat at the hands of the Tatar conqueror Tamerlane, who had captured their Sultan Bayezid. But Tamerlane only wished to neutralize Turkish power on his borders, not to conquer their land. Bayezid's son Mehmed took control (supported by religious orders and artisan guilds — suggesting, in the Dark Fantastic world, the secret support of the Ahl-i-Batin, and maybe others). Mehmed's successor, Murad II, restored Ottoman power in Europe, threatened Constantinople, and fought wars with Venice and Hungary.

But Murad faced an internal problem in the shape of the Turkish nobles. To balance this, he used many non-Turkish servants, including Christian slaves and converts, and especially the Janissaries — soldiers who had been recruited, during childhood, from Christian subjects as a “human tax,” who were then raised as devoted Muslims and supporters of the Sultan. In time, these Janissaries will become a major faction in Turkish courts throughout the *Sorcerers Crusade* era and beyond.

Murad's heir, Mehmed II, captures Constantinople in 1453, then completes the conquest of Greece, Serbia and Albania, among other territories. Clearly, he presents a deadly threat to every ruler on his borders. Faced with this ambitious ruler, some of those sovereigns resort to very dark tactics indeed.

The Dragon and the Impaler

Ironically, some of the leaders who cause trouble on the Ottoman borders were trained and brought up at the Ottomans' own courts. The Albanian national hero Skanderbeg, for example, had been a hostage who adopted, then renounced, Islam. Another troublemaker is the son of a Wallachian prince, educated alongside Mehmed, who claims power in his homeland by facing down the Turks while seeking support from Hungary — and other quarters. This is Vlad Tepes, known as Vlad the Impaler... and Dracula.

A charismatic monarch with mysterious alliances and a penchant for cruelty, Vlad Dracula cuts an elusive figure in the Dark Fantastic world. By many accounts, he's the heir to an Infernal society, the Order of the Dragon (**Infernalism: The Path of Screams**, p. 93.); possibly, he's a vampire's pawn — or a vampire himself. Very much alive until 1479, Vlad apparently survives his “death” and continues to haunt the occult landscape. Decades after his supposed demise, Dracula is said to play a part in Hermetic intrigues between Houses Tytalus, Bonisagus, Flambeau and Ex Miscellanea; in royal politics from Britain to Transylvania; and in the shadowy “War of the Damned” that reputedly rages between vampire families and mortal Inquisitors. Whatever the truth might be (and we leave that truth to you, the Storyteller, to decide), Vlad the Impaler stands out, even in this tumultuous era, as a ruler to be reckoned with... and feared. (Note: For “official” details about Dracula and his various intrigues, see the **Vampire: The Dark Ages** supplement **Transylvania Chronicles II: Son of the Dragon.**)

In any case, not even Dracula can delay the expansion of Ottoman rule for long. The reign of Suleyman the Magnificent, from 1520 to 1566, becomes the golden age of Ottoman power. Turkish armies push into Hungary, and eventually reach the walls of Vienna. There, however, they stop; the Empire has reached the limits of its capabilities, on land and also at sea. From now on, despite occasional victories, the Turks remain essentially a static power in the

world. While Europe profits from the Renaissance, the Ottomans decide that they have no need to change. In coming centuries, the error of that logic will slowly become clear to everyone but them.

Russia

Awakened Western Europeans sometimes refer to Russia's vast expanse as "the Courts of the Wolf." Even if one can avoid the rampaging blood-pagans, were-beasts and barbarians, this is a wild and largely desolate land; in fact, it's still legitimate territory for Void Seeker exploration. Which is not to say that the Russians are *always* hostile and xenophobic (though some are); it's simply that Russia barely seems to be part of Europe at all.

At the start of the 15th century, Russia is divided into principalities and city-states, all of which owe fealty to the Tatars of the Golden Horde (descendents of the Mongols), who play the Russian princes against each other. However, the Principality of Muscovy (Moscow) is growing in power while its rulers carefully avoid annoying the Tatars.

Eventually, Prince Ivan the Great of Muscovy (1440-1505) will attempt to weld Russia into a mighty nation. When he comes to the throne in 1462, Ivan launches a series of military campaigns and downright Machiavellian political plots, first absorbing small neighbors, then conquering the once-mighty Novgorod. He also stops paying tribute to the Golden Horde; when they join with Lithuania and Poland in an invasion of Russia, Ivan allies with their rivals, the Crimean Tatars, and wins the war.

Later, Ivan also marries the niece of the last Byzantine emperor; thenceforward, Russia's leader claims to be the spiritual heir of Byzantium. However, he becomes entangled in wars with his brothers, wife and son, and loses a great deal of his power and influence. After Ivan dies, his son and heir, Vasily, continues his work. But it will be his grandson, Ivan "the Terrible" (1530-1584), who become the first Russian ruler to take the title "tsar" ("Caesar") and leave the greatest mark on Russian history.

Ivan the Terrible starts his reign as a great reformer, but his dislike for aristocratic rivals slips into paranoia and tyranny. After a strange (and perhaps magically induced) fit, Ivan becomes a raging madman. For entertainment, he orders the slaughter of whole villages and monasteries; the victims are hacked to bits, cooked alive, drowned under ice, or ripped apart by wolves. Naturally, Russia suffers badly under Ivan's rule; eventually, the Crimean Tatars return to take advantage of the chaos. It will be centuries before Russia truly emerges from the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance never really reaches this far. In the Dark Fantastic world, Conventions and Traditions alike remain weak in Russia. In their places, the land teems with blood-pagans, Marauds, Disparate shamans, vampires and werewolves.

Beyond Europe

(See also *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*, Chapters III and IV.)

Out of necessity, this volume concentrates on Europe. This continent is likely to be the epicenter of most games, and when it comes to social life, trade and politics, generalizations simply will not serve; we must talk of specific cases. Besides, Europe may not necessarily be the most advanced or refined culture of the era, but it's probably the most *dynamic*. Court politics elsewhere tend toward formality and rigidity, and ancient laws and traditions often shackle trade.

However, there *are* other cultures with courts and traders:

- Although they're largely unknown among the courts of Europe, the *Americas* (as they will come to be known) boast mighty cities and impressively far-ranging merchants. The mighty empires of Tenochtitlan (Mexico) and the Maya gather many smaller city-states into a colorful collection of vassal-states. Here, strict codes of conduct and piety seemingly keep the world in balance. The usual chaos of European courts cannot be tolerated in these lands; high-ranking officials are, in fact, governed by harsher standards than the common folk, and the penalty for most infractions is disfigurement, exile or death.

Although this "new world" abounds with what Europeans would call "sorcery," True Magi appear to be rare. Most important figures practice intricate forms of herbal healing, divination and astrology, but chaotic "witchcraft" is shunned and often punished. Hence, aside from a handful of rural priest-kings, shamans and outlaw witches, very few magickal societies exist. Several of the largest urban cultures in Central America, however, appear to be dominated by vampire gods or shapeshifting monsters, who close this New World off from Enlightened influence until European invaders tear the old order apart.

- The cultures of *Africa*, too, will suffer badly in the colonial era to come, although their fall will be *slightly* less extreme. In many of these independent kingdoms learning, family honor and personal integrity make up for elaborate governmental structure. Men and women are expected to be truthful and brave, while liars and conspirators are expelled into the unforgiving wilderness. Thus, despite a strong trade base and elaborate social customs, European-style intrigue never really takes hold in Africa.

At present, the kingdoms of Songhai, Mali, Zimbabwe, Timbuktu and their sister cities have very little to do with the warring factions of the Council and White Tower. A handful of societies *do* send ambassadors to the Grand Convocation and the White Tower, however; the Madzimbabwe and Ngoma sects attend the Traditions' gathering, but opt out of the War. Other tribal groups eventually join the Batini and Dream-speaker Traditions, while a small but wealthy sect of merchant-wizards from Mali, the Dyula, establish an influential High Guild hall in their kingdom. The later group provides the Order of Reason with a solid avenue into the African trade markets, and channels a steady flow of gold, gems, steel, and eventually slaves back and forth between Africa and Europe.

ITEM, FIRST: THE AGE OF MASKS

• The Islamic cultures of **The Middle East** are every bit as intricate as those of Europe, and their court politics occasionally make Italian city-states look crude in comparison. Courtly stories set in these lands must be played out rather differently, however. Muslim realms are even more autocratic than European kingdoms; their lords are sultans who combine absolute legal power with the knowledge that usurpation is *always* a threat. (A successful coup, it is said, demonstrates the favor of Destiny and Allah.) Many court-servants, furthermore, are slaves raised from birth to display total loyalty. Plots are everywhere, of course, but they're carried out with far more subtlety and restraint — the fate of conspirators is, at best, a long and hideous death.

Political intrigue, in Muslim lands, consists of a mixture of vicious harem conspiracies and attempts to curry the ruler's favor, punctuated by brief, bloody wars of succession. Courtliness itself consists of intricate rituals of obeisance, while high-ranking womenfolk are kept enclosed in the harem. (Indeed, the Sultan of Turkey has hundreds of slave-concubines, but is forbidden by law to take an actual wife, lest she become a large target for intrigue.) Characters operating in such an atmosphere must be *very* certain of their manners and their place in the hierarchy. Anyone who attempts to grasp control of the court will need extraordinary allies and resources; although the rewards *may* justify the risk, the punishments for treason make the English custom of hanging, drawing and quartering look tame.

On the supernatural side, the courts of Islam are heavily dominated by the Ahl-i-Batin, whose legendary subtlety flowers in these quiet corridors of power. At times, however, these Batin find themselves competing with strange dervishes and magi — Seers of Chronos, Taftâni, independent sorcerers, and a few terribly dark and devious Fallen Ones. Unlike the “rational” courtiers of Europe, most Muslim rulers are all too willing to respect miracles and magick, even if these wonders prove to be false. Has the Prophet not spoken of such things himself? Thus, many a magician finds employment and influence within a sultan's court. And although his Arts may be frowned upon, the Muslim court magus fears no Holy Inquisition. Thus, he can amaze his patrons with spectacularly vulgar displays of magick (flying carpets, conjured djinn, magnificent pyrotechnics, and so on).

Against this tapestry of wonders, Middle Eastern Daedaleans must tread carefully — the Grand Vizier might not appreciate competition, and the Sultan will not kill his golden goose on some artisan's say-so! Even so, the Artificers, House of Mercy (Cosians), and High Guild hold quite a bit of influence in Muslim courts; after all, Mohammed himself was a merchant, and scholarship, medicine and mathematics have risen to unequalled heights under Islam. Thus, a subtle but constant interplay exists between court magicians and philosopher-scientists; both sides crave one another's secrets, but usually prefer to dominate the local ruler themselves.

• Islamic empires are expanding into **India**, too, as they have been for centuries. By the 15th century, Muslims dominate the northern reaches of the sub-continent and re-shape the intricate weave of Hindu culture in exotic and (often puzzling) new directions. As each dynasty of invaders establishes itself, the new rulers tend to absorb some of India's traditional government

practices; soon, their courts become even more formal and ritualized than those of most Muslim lands. India's caste system provides whole hierarchies of civil servants, trained from birth in the traditions of their posts.

Meanwhile, a rich tradition of mysticism, wilder and more colorful than any European mythology, grants the magical politics an otherworldly air. Divine “avatars” (living embodiments of gods) frequently appear; elemental duels rage; creatures with oddly-colored skin and multiple limbs run wild across the landscape, while *siddhus*, death-magi and Ecstatics embark on dark quests of enlightenment and ruin. Despite the sobering influence of the Muslim conquerors, Indian magick is rarely subtle. Here, the Order of Reason simply gives up, surrendering the whole region to the chaos it apparently deserves.

• **Cathay** (China), in contrast, represents the epitome of courtly formality. Here, every task or activity seems to have some officer to oversee its perfection. The long-established Confucian bureaucrats (and their wizardly counterparts, the Wu Lung) have very little regard for trade or flexibility — they insist that the good order of the universe is sustained by scrupulous obedience to ancient rituals. An old saying insists that “if the mat is not straight, the Master will not sit.” Cathayan government reflects this rigidity, and if the reality often falls short of the ideal, no one readily admits as much. Intrigue, in this environment, is infuriatingly slow and subtle; often, it manifests through deliberate errors, rumors and misdirection. When a target appears unstable (or has been made to look that way), it's an easy matter to suggest his “removal” — often by frightening tortures or sudden purges.

The beleaguered Akashic magi can attest to this. Too free-spirited for most Chinese rulers, they make convenient scapegoats for the Wu Lung and other rival sects. Daedaleans, on the other hand, enjoy cordial relationships with many rulers, and receive a great deal of official sanction and support. The Dalou'laoshi, with their command of artisanship and protocol, have established grand halls and titanic workshops within the Chinese empire. Their counterparts, the Hua T'o (Cosians) and the Albatross (High) Guildsmen, flourish here as well. A long-standing truce between the Dragon Wizards and these patrons of Order simmers with occasional resentment, but sheds little blood. Even so, Enlightened tradesmen chafe under subtle constraints in China. Some secretly rejoice when barbarian incursions (such as Mongol invasions) present the Dragon Wizards with unforeseen complications, for the chaos of war loosens restrictions upon government and trade. This is a land where factions who have no great problem working together in Europe often find themselves at odds, but “natural enemies” get along quite well.

• Other nations in eastern Asia range from archaic tribal kingdoms to advanced, complex political units who borrow Indian culture or Confucian Chinese political theory. One of these, **Chipango** (Japan), supposedly seats an all-powerful emperor, with a large and very formal court, who is actually nearly powerless — contending clan-lords merely use him to legitimize their power. By the end of the **Sorcerers Crusade** era, however, some of these lords will acquire enough power to unify the country.

In Japan as elsewhere, changes are coming....

Games Among the Mighty

*But if Greatness be so blind,
As to trust in Towers of Air,
Let it be with Goodness lin'd,
That at least the Fall be fair.*

— Sir Henry Wotton, *Upon the Sudden Restraint of the Earl of Somerset*

In almost any Renaissance court, cool charm and quick wits count more than strong arms or fiery magicks. Indeed, strong allies are as important as defeated enemies, and living secrets are better than corpses on the floor. Any courtier worth her title must be able to keep track of the shifting pattern of alliances and enmities around her, and to exploit them when need be. Sooner or later, friends and secrets *always* come in handy.

The secret history of the Dark Fantastic world adds a few additional twists to the serpentine ways of court. Innovation and tradition each boast their own magick-wielding champions, and those patrons tend to look out for their own best interests. While this division seems like an obvious case of Council magus versus Daedalean, the truth is far more complex; some Hermetics and Choristers share keen interest in the new “mundane” arts, while conservative Gabrielites and Craftmasons keep wary eyes on the secular changes around them. Yes, there are Artificers building new machines, Guildsmen opening up new markets, Solificati nobles holding to their feudal rights, and Dream-speaker shamans warning against foreigners; but no wizard’s allegiance can be counted solely by her Tradition or Convention. Some so-called “mysticks” have very modern tastes, while many Daedaleans are suspicious of *too much* innovation.

A proper swashbuckler, no matter what her social station might be, is expected to know who’s who, why, and what they do. Within the walls of palace or manor house, ignorance is death. A quick sword or charm spell will get one only so far. A working knowledge of the household, on the other hand, can turn even a lowly kitchen scut into a dangerous opponent.

Royal Courts

A court is, in essence, a household; but it also serves the purposes of government and, to some extent, business. Every titled noble, from a minor earl to the king or queen, has a private residence. Depending on the official, her domain, and her personal wealth and influence, this court could be a manor house, a keep, a castle, or a grand palace. The larger the court, the larger its staff and grounds, and the greater its power. All

such courts owe allegiance to the head of state — the king, queen, emperor or sultan — although, of course, that loyalty may be highly suspect. In essence, though, each court is a household unto itself. And regardless of the size and power of this household, certain elements are fairly universal:

People

In any royal household, the king or queen stands at the apex of the system, with his or her immediate family close to hand. The next levels down are occupied by senior government officials whose titles and ranks are basically those of household servants. From there, several ranks of minor servants and “unofficial” officers handle much of the hour-to-hour labor around the palace. Finally, a multitude of scuts and slaves occupy the lowest echelons of the court. All folk, tradition says, receive their social stations from God Himself. And although some philosophers have begun to debate this “wisdom,” every court is built upon it.

Ranks and titles tend to be tricky, yet important, things in any noble household; this is doubly true in a royal palace, where one’s title reflects one’s status in the kingdom at large. The importance of a post often hinges on its proximity to the king or queen. For example, the *chamberlain* is literally the person responsible for the sovereign’s private chambers — the place where the king keeps his valuables, and where he goes to think. Thus, the chamberlain is an important minister, probably even commanding the *treasurer*, who attends to financial matters for both the court and its provinces.

The third great figure is the *chancellor*, who supervises the chapel and the court’s written records, and hence becomes the province’s chief administrator. The *marshal*, originally in charge of the serving staff in the hall, and the *constable*, originally in charge of the court’s horses, both have crucial responsibility for the monarch’s personal safety. In the course of their offices, these men often acquire military duties as well, and serve as advisors or commanders in the royal army. Likewise, the *seneschal* or *steward*, originally a high-ranking servant responsible for food and drink, also bears responsibility for managing the lord’s estates; in many courts, that job is divided between a “household steward” and a more important “estate steward.” Other, lower ranks assume positions of lesser importance.

Most sovereigns occupy several different households — a home palace and several lesser (often seasonal) courts. In many lands, the king and queen tend separate residences, while older children and trusted servants oversee minor royal estates. Small royal households feature minimal staff and offices; the larger ones, naturally, command dozens of servants, and grand heads of state command hundreds. In time, servant offices become ceremonial ranks within the government. As royal courts expand into national institutions, deputies do the actual work while the title-holders become powerful state advisors. Despite the origins of these titles, however, there’s no disgrace in being descended from important

servants; noble families such as the Scottish Stewarts, whose ancestors were court stewards, eventually attain the status of courtiers — or monarchs — themselves. Hence, the servants become the served.

(Similar systems exist outside Christendom — the Middle Eastern title of *vizier*, or grand minister, once denoted the palace porter. Sometimes, these posts get downright bizarre; among the Ottoman Turks, for example, the sultan's chief cook bears a giant spoon as a badge of rank. Here, offices such as "Chief Keeper of the Nightingales" and "Chief Tender of the Baths" exist, and the Head Gardener may also be the Chief Executioner. In some Ottoman palaces, "gardeners" — robust country boys with no strong political connections — and professional entertainers also become useful bruisers when a few heads need breaking.)

Wherever they might be, courts are divided into departments, each with its own hierarchy. Senior officials oversee their juniors, often keeping them in line with wits, threats, social influence, and beatings. Household offices are often, but not always, hereditary. Within especially rich or powerful courts, each major office (steward, chamberlain, etc.) has a senior manager and several underlings or apprentices. A king's stables, for example, may boast a constable-general, a constable, an apprentice constable, two senior grooms, four grooms and 10 stable-boys. And in such stables, as anywhere else, shit rolls downhill.

The royal family, of course, complicates matters immensely. In a stable, reasonably happy court, the blood relations get along fairly well. Cousins serve as advisors and aides to the monarch; princes of the blood (especially the rightful heir) are trained as rulers; and spouses and other children manage important household affairs. Princes and princesses often find themselves married off to strangers as part of some diplomatic maneuver, but that's the price they pay for their privilege. Royal bastards often have duties and privileges within the estate — they are, after all, scions of royal blood — but are rarely granted real power. Occasionally, they're raised elsewhere, or simply disposed of before they can pose a threat.

Very few families are so stable, however. More often, noble households degenerate into separate cliques, square off against the others, and keep the servants running around on various different errands. (See *The Lion in Winter* or *King Lear* for excellent examples of blueblood fratricide.) This, of course, exacerbates the tensions of political intrigue. (It's worth noting, however, that families who fight constantly with one another usually band together against outside threats... and God help the outside party when they do!) And all families, even the healthiest ones, have their black sheep — their prodigal sons and daughters; wealth and influence just add fuel to the domestic fires. When royal power is at stake — or denied to lesser heirs — resentment sometimes turns to bloodshed. And when a quarrel over some family inheritance involves a kingdom, the result can be civil war.

Household Offices and Their Functions

In this era, what you do determines in many ways who you are. Despite the new ideals regarding the Dignity of Man, Renaissance Europe is class-conscious in ways no modern American can comprehend. The court reflects the ultimate consummation of that hierarchy. Even here, however, the "servants" exert influence far out of proportion to their "official" status; without the cooperation of several dozen competent and loyal underlings, no noble household can function. So while the titled nobles get the attention and respect, household officers command a fair amount of authority, too.

The following list reflects common offices within royal, noble and wealthy merchant households throughout Western Europe (especially in Britain). All languages have their own terms for these offices, of course, and other cultures have different kinds of servants (eunuchs, rabbis, concubines, etc.). Even so, the basic requirements of a large household are more or less universal, and most of these offices are likewise. For noble and clerical titles (and the Merit of that name), see *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*, pp. 125-126.

Senior Posts

Chamberlain: Originally a servant responsible for the lord's private chambers, and hence the treasure-chest; later, this post gains general financial responsibilities. Often, the chamberlain serves as confidante to the highest-ranking noblemen; subsequently, he commands a great deal of respect and influence. Also, *Lord Chamberlain*.

Treasurer: A financial official, possibly working under the chamberlain. This servant must be skilled in mathematics, accounting, and subterfuge. Obviously, a very important post, especially in merchant households.

Chancellor: A royal servant (often a priest) with responsibility over legal documents. To fulfill his duties, this servant is often left in charge of the royal seal, a signet required for most official documents.

Marshal: Originally the servant in charge of serving-staff in the hall. This post implies responsibility for bodyguard work, too; hence, the office later becomes a senior military rank. In many royal homes, the Marshal also oversees spying and counter-intrigue; some courts, however, have a separate and "unofficial" lord protector who handles the monarch's dirty work. (See the film *Elizabeth*.)

Bailiff: An administrator in charge of an estate, castle or district — often a royal official with law-enforcement responsibility and considerable personal power. In some courts, this position is considered part of a seneschal's job.

Seneschal: Originally in charge of feasts, this post later assumes responsibility for a lord's household and estates. A good seneschal is well organized, literate, and versed in several levels

of etiquette. Often the head servant, the seneschal has considerable legal power over other household servants. Also, *Steward*.

Captain of the Guard: The direct supervisor and commander of the estate's military forces, bodyguards, and security. A very powerful post, held by a loyal, intelligent and seasoned warrior.

Constable: The servant who oversees the horses and stables; in great households, this often leads to control of large military forces. Hence, the term is later attached to garrison commanders, policemen, and other officers of the law.

Lady-in-Waiting: A high-ranking woman who acts as personal servant, confidante and companion to a queen. Also, *Lady of Honor*, *Lady of Presence*, or *Lady of the Bedchamber*.

Herald: A royal officer responsible for proclamations and ceremonies. Literate and often schooled in basic law, etiquette and oratory, a herald needs to know who's who, and must memorize the faces, coat-of-arms (heraldry) and complete titles of all rich and/or noble families in his realm.

Reeve: A minor official appointed to oversee estates or workmen. In many cases, he's the only royal official a peasant will ever personally meet, and he's granted considerable discretionary power over legal and financial matters that involve commoners.

Minor or Unofficial Posts

Among these lesser posts, status depends more on the personalities of the ruler and her servants than on any rigid hierarchy. Thus, intrigue and favor-mongering provide common "pastimes" for these minor, but still vital, servitors.

Bodyguard: A soldier, usually but not always of common birth, who furnishes personal protection for ranking nobles and officials. Known for his impressive combat skills (and occasional magickal and political ones, as well), a bodyguard must be unwaveringly loyal and discrete.

Butler: A servant in charge of wine and other drinks. (Much later, this title will become the term for the chief male servant in a private household.)

Chaplain: A priest serving in the house's chapel. Literate by necessity, this servant may have clerical duties as well.

Cook: Although he has little legal power, the man who oversees the kitchens, food preparation, and storage commands a great deal of influence within the household.

Fool: The "official" household entertainment. Usually deformed, mentally deficient, notably ugly, or otherwise handicapped, the fool has one advantage: He (or she) is allowed to say and do things that any other person would be killed for, partly because it's considered entertaining when he does so, and partly out of respect for the tradition that "wisdom often proceeds from the mouth of a fool."

Groom: Hands-on tender of the royal horses, hounds, hawks and other beasts. By necessity, this servant is good with animals, and can usually perform basic veterinary medicine. Often, a groom or two accompanies noblefolk who wish to go riding, or who take long trips.

Maid-in-Waiting: Like the Lady, a personal servant of a noblewoman. Maids, however, are young, unmarried, and theoretically virgins (although many household servants and guards could dispute the latter qualification).

Manservant: Any gentleman worth the name has a personal servant who tends his "mundane" needs (doing laundry, acquiring goods and lodgings, attending to his quarters, etc.). Although lowly of birth (and usually comical in personality), the manservant tends to be very loyal, and wiser than he appears. Also, *Lackey*.

Matron: An older lady (often married or widowed) who supervises female servants and young, unmarried girls. Skilled in spinning, gossip, social graces and often languages and literacy, the matron ("mother") provides moral guidance and practical instruction.

Mistress: An "unofficial" but very influential position within the household. Many noblemen indulge their lusts (and occasionally, true affections) on pretty women kept exclusively for that purpose. Although few mistresses retain their influence for long, many grow adept at politics (household and otherwise). In the East, kings and sultans retain whole harems of concubines, or "second wives," who often command more respect than the king's wife herself does.

Nurse: The woman (often common-born) who nurses royal children in infancy, and tends the girls day-to-day until they are married. Although a nurse has little "titled" power, she exerts considerable informal influence, and often serves as the confidante of noble girls (and sometimes boys as well).

Page: A junior figure in the household — often a young nobleman in training for knighthood — who runs errands, delivers messages, arranges assignations, and performs other minor tasks for noble folk.

Scribe: One of several servants kept to author, translate or transcribe letters and documents for noblefolk and senior officials. Usually of common birth, but literate in several languages.

Squire: A personal assistant, bodyguard or escort to a knight or other noble, often in training for the knighthood. Later used as a term for a minor country gentleman.

Tutor: Teacher of the royal children, the tutor is a man (usually a commoner) of considerable learning who instructs male children (rarely girls) in academia, etiquette, philosophy and proper behavior. In many ways a male counterpart to the nurse, the tutor is expected to provide moral guidance to young noblemen and princes.

Most households also contain dozens of "insignificant" servants and slaves who do scut work like food-service, cleaning, gardening, and so forth. Such wretches rarely have any form of power or title (aside from "You, there!"). In a world where *any* person can Awaken, however, such affairs can change rather quickly...

The Buildings

Obviously, a court must have a home — somewhere its members eat, sleep, keep records, entertain, and defend against attack. The **Castles and Covenants** supplement supplies a great deal of basic information about courts and palaces, particularly in Chapter I. Certain details, however, are worth addressing here.

In this period, many rulers are moving out of drafty, inconvenient castles and into grand, well-lit palaces. Siege cannon can bring down most castle walls, and few castles are large enough to hold growing modern armies, anyway. If need be, a monarch can always move back to his ancestral castle when war is declared, and so many older strongholds are kept in good repair just in case. Many others are refortified, expanded, and even rebuilt — quite a few palaces have been constructed around an aging but sturdy castle keep. Even the newer palaces, however, feature thick walls and lethal defenses. No ruler is foolish enough to leave himself unprotected.

Most great buildings have a courtyard-based plan. Castles are an obvious example, with their tower-studded curtain walls surrounding the inner spaces, but grand houses and palaces also often follow the pattern. With a courtyard running in between the towers, buildings and battlements, light and air can flow among the various structures, while the buildings themselves provide a sheltered, open area

where horses can be attended to and so forth. For story purposes, the courtyard also provides a wonderful setting for many scenes. Characters on the walls or on higher floors can look down on the action from all sides; the limited number of exits forces anyone trying to escape the scene to be creative; and household servants, stray minor characters, and probably domestic animals all get in the way.

In the courtyard, visitors pause for assessment when they arrive — assuming they've been permitted past any guards at the entrance gate. Gaining admittance to a castle or palace is usually easy enough in peacetime, as even a royal court must receive deliveries of food and routine visitors. Getting *beyond* this public open space, however, will require better excuses or greater social skills.

It's not usually too hard to gain admittance to the court's great hall — a large room used for feasts, large meetings, and more-or-less public audiences. In the old days, almost all court business took place in that hall; the ruler and his retinue ate there, talked there, and in earliest times, slept there. In this more civilized age, rulers maintain small private chambers behind and beyond the hall. Gaining admittance to *those* requires a very good reason or exceptional ingenuity.

Indeed, among all the petitioners, diplomats, lawyers and sycophants (equivalent, in 20th-century terms, to lobbyists, lawyers, diplomats and groupies all mixed



together), the degree of access that one gains to the physical buildings — and hence to the rulers — is a critical mark of status. Note, incidentally, that while most visitors visit temporarily, some stay here indefinitely. This, after all, is the age that invents the idea of an ambassador as a permanent agent in a foreign land, rather than as someone on a short, specific mission.

Great halls and their attendant galleries, banquet halls and ballrooms, are designed to impress. In rich courts, these areas overflow with ornate artwork and furniture — all the better to display the host's wealth and taste (or lack thereof). Fortunately for swashbuckling types (and their Storytellers), entertainment chambers feature plenty of chandeliers, tapestries, candelabras, sturdy tables, and fragile bric-a-brac. Most great halls rise two or three stories in height, and boast minstrel galleries, choir lofts, balconies, and hanging decorations. There's a reason why most swashbuckling tales climax with a battle in the great hall: there are plenty of things to break, swing on, and leap off of. As for the host... well, he'll get over it. One hopes.

"On Progress": Mobile Courts

As mentioned above, most sovereigns keep several palaces open. Although the true "seat of government" is usually based in the monarch's home palace, many kings and queens spend a lot of time "on progress," traveling round their lands and living on the (compulsory) hospitality of noble folk. Such "touring" achieves several ends.

To begin with, the monarch can survey the state of the kingdom. If farms look poor, there's a problem; if they look prosperous, it may be time to raise taxes a bit. Likewise, the traveling monarch can inspect military defenses and roads, while monitoring the loyalty of her lords; it's hard for a noble to plot treason while the Queen is in his house! Some rulers, such as Elizabeth I, make a sophisticated policy of all this. She frequently descends on her vassals with large retinues, apparently at random, but actually with calculated effect.

And a large retinue can be very large! After all, any monarch must travel with (at minimum) a substantial bodyguard, a number of personal servants, and enough changes of clothes to be able to appear suitably grand as required. At the very least, the Queen will require a few dozen people and several wagons, and it doesn't take much effort to expand the baggage-train to *hundreds* of people. Elizabeth, who takes the system to an extreme, travels in the company of her senior advisors — all of them high-ranking nobles, with their own personal staffs and guards. Supposedly, her progresses involve over 400 wagons and coaches and 2400 packhorses.

A large-scale visit like that can practically bankrupt a host. This expense is no accident; a poor noble cannot afford to raise troops for a rebellion, whereas one with too

much wealth may develop ideas above his station. And a noble *must* entertain the monarch generously — anything less would seem disloyal. (Of course, impressive hospitality is a way to make a good impression; some "prodigy houses" are specifically designed to impress visiting monarchs. This, of course, has its own risks. A noble who can afford to entertain *too* lavishly seems to have some illegal source of income!)

On the other hand, a monarch on a "progress" (as these tours are known) is more vulnerable than one in a castle. Touring like this is not a trick for monarchs who seriously expect war or assassination. In later centuries, kings such as Louis XIV will prefer to remain in one place, forcing the nobles come to *him* while he retains complete control over the country *and* the court.

Noble Houses

The courts of princes and nobility usually resemble smaller versions of the royal palace — perhaps quite literally, in lands where the monarch dictates fashion and the nobility strives to match him. Of course, certain aspects of the royal system are less relevant elsewhere; few minor nobles have enough paperwork to need a chancellor, and servants' titles are likely to be serious rather than honorary.

Noble courts and households range from the spectacular palaces held by princes and dukes, to the run-down keeps held by petty knights who can barely afford a few servants. On disputed borders and in unstable kingdoms, noblefolk live in large castles, with well-armed followers; in peaceful lands, the rich prefer warm, luxurious houses with fewer defenses.

A nobleman (or woman) of reasonable standing usually owns several houses. And although he probably doesn't travel around "in progress" the way his queen does, the wise nobleman spends time all over his province, moving from place to place in order to keep an eye on things. He might, of course, elect to remain at one favorite residence, amusing himself at his domain's expense and leaving his affairs in the hands of his servants. This is a quick route to unpopularity, of course, and a good way to get cheated by disloyal subordinates. Unless a lazy nobleman is ruthless and strong (or fantastically — perhaps magically — charismatic), he'll probably find himself on the receiving end of a revolt... or a royal execution.

Unlike his sovereign, a nobleman often handles his own protection. Hence, he usually maintains a small but loyal band of personal guards, spies, and torturers to handle problems. Powerful nobles, like Cesare Borgia, have dungeons beneath their estates. It's said that Borgia disposes of several enemies a *day* in his "private chambers." Considering the ambition, decadence and sheer paranoia of many noble folk, Cesare is probably the rule rather than the exception, at least in the World of Darkness.

Some courts, in contrast, can be frivolous, even downright sybaritic, intended more for entertainment than for any form of government. This is particularly true of households run by wives or junior offspring of kings or other great figures. The king can retire there occasionally for amusement; the rest of the time, the idle rich treat them as centers of fashion. Intrigues in such pleasure-palaces are played for smaller stakes than at the royal court, but can still become vicious. Sometimes, a barbed remark leaves the victim a social outcast; occasionally, squabbles turn into real duels to the death.

The court of Marguerite of Navarre (1492-1549) is such a place. Originally the sister of King Francis I of France, Marguerite of Angoulême marries Henry II of Navarre, and becomes a queen in her own right. A writer, poet and noted skeptic of Church doctrine, Queen Marguerite holds some fairly complex, unconventional religious ideas. Although she's not a Protestant *per se*, the Queen protects both Protestants and free-thinking Humanists, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Marguerite seems to permit and even encourage relaxed morality at her court, perhaps in the style of old-fashioned "courtly love," and she is attacked for her skepticism and free-thinking by puritans of every stripe (including some Protestants whom she once protected). Marguerite's popularity with Francis and with her subjects shelters her from outright persecution, however, and she remains a patron of artists and philosophers for decades to come.

(Marguerite would make an excellent character to feature in a chronicle. Although she's prone to sermonizing and debate, the Queen has an insatiable curiosity for unusual ideas, and could make a helpful patron for magi of almost any sect. (Excepting, of course, openly Infernal or barbaric ones.) She might even be a magus in her own right, although if she is, she keeps such practices *very* quiet!

Merchant Houses

In this age, merchants are not, as a rule, as powerful as kings or feudal lords. (The exceptions being, of course, Italian merchant-princes such as the Medici and the fabulously wealthy Fuggers of Austria, who eventually become nobility.) Thus, even the wealthiest of them do not generally maintain great courtly houses. Doing so would probably provoke the bluebloods, who tend to regard their noble birthrights rather jealously — and who usually command armies, as well. Still, a prosperous merchant lives *very* well, and he controls a household as busy and intricate as many a lord.

Considering that he's made his fortune the hard way, a "merchant prince" may be more willing to get his hands dirty in the household's day-to-day business. (Or in the

shadow intrigues that seem to underlie most business transactions.) Many merchant houses incorporate the family's warehouse, and the masters of the family descend there each day to supervise deliveries and deal with visiting customers. Even so, merchants *do* have servants and apprentices to perform the routine labor; wise ones also keep bruisers on the payroll for the inevitable downturns and disputes.

These days, nearly all merchants belong to trade guilds (and have ties to, if not membership in, the High Guild itself). Such guilds have bylaws and agreements that limit overt warfare, but sometimes encourage covert assassination, deception and sabotage. (A little bloodshed is always good for business, so long as things don't get out of control.) These associations have sumptuous meeting halls decorated with finery associated with the trade in question (grand tapestries for clothiers, sculptures and elaborate architecture for stonemasons, and so forth), and often contain shrines to the appropriate saints. Dark folk tales claim that other, more-sinister altars can be found in the catacombs beneath many guild halls, too, but very few people who see such things — or speak of them — survive for long.

A truly wealthy merchant owns a grand house in or around the town's main square, often across the street from the guild hall, marketplace, or both. His less-successful brethren acquire property near the main gate or a navigable river. Even merchant sea-captains, who spend much of their lives aboard ship, like to have decent houses ashore. After all, a sturdy house (often decorated with nautical gear, exotic trophies, and seaworthy architecture) provides storage room for goods, a comfortable resting-place during off-seasons, and a jolly place for celebrations and reunions with old shipmates.

Unlike kings and nobles, merchants don't have many traditional social duties — a wedding, meeting or banquet now and then, but nothing too vital. Hence, these "new princes" live fairly private lives. Unless she wants to be arrested for burglary, a character who wants to get into a merchant's house will need an invitation of some kind. On the other hand, few merchants will risk acting hostile toward strangers. (Unlike nobles, who have little reason *not* to be difficult if they so wish.) One never knows who that new big customer might be! A person who wants to visit a merchant at home simply needs an invitation to a party, membership in a guild, a favor to extract, or business to conduct. As one might imagine, such things are easy enough for certain magi (say, Guildsmen) to obtain, and damnably difficult for others (say, scabby Pagan vagabonds) to get. Wealth has its privileges, as they say, and although a merchant might be born of common stock, he can afford to keep exclusive company.

Princes of the Church

In an age when bishops and cardinals command great estates and even principalities, and the Pope's word is law (in some matters, at least), leading churchmen possess their own courts and palaces, with laymen employed as servants, soldiers and officials. Technically, these properties all belong to the Church, but the bishops, abbesses, cardinals and so forth who maintain these grounds are essentially lords and ladies of the realm — and are frequently more powerful than the secular nobles around them. A single earl, for instance, has only his personal power and the authority of a distant monarch behind him; a bishop not only commands secular authorities, Church underlings and his own congregation, but he also holds the keys to Heaven and Hell in his theoretical grasp. Many a man would rather defy an angry baron than an angry priest; the baron can only kill your body — the priest might save or damn your soul!

Most church folk live communally, bound by oaths of chastity and poverty. The most powerful and wealthy officials, though, tend abbeys, monasteries and great estates. Here, clusters of stone buildings house stables, forges, gardens, archives, kitchens, storage rooms and chapels. Men and women live separately (if both sexes share a single home at all), and the lesser clergy have spare, tiny quarters, often furnished with only cots, tables, and perhaps a chest and chair or two (as well as the obvious crucifix for meditation). In many orders, new initiates share large common rooms and work together under the supervision of senior members. The seniors often have private cells; in the case of chief officials, these quarters can be quite luxurious, and often contain small laboratories, reading-rooms, or personal vaults.

In all but the most remote monasteries, laypersons tend the livestock and grounds, in return for shelter and church services. Many of these folk are orphans, prospective initiates, or sinners working toward penance, and they live separately from the ordained clergy. According to many accounts, underground tunnels run between the living areas of the priests, nuns, and laborers; at night, it is said, dark trades of flesh and spirit stain these corridors, but by day the clergy and their flocks keep a respectful distance.

Still, there are always differences between secular and Church courts. Senior clergymen must tend Church business, and like to be thought to live holy lives. Lesser priests and sisters work among the laymen to handle religious matters, while their seniors maintain communication with nearby cathedrals or great churches. The usual court ranks are absent here; all residents are considered brothers and sisters in Christ — the only "official" distinctions are those between ordained clergy and laity, and between officials, seniors and novices.

Status and intrigue take different forms in Church "courts." Here, piety, rather than cleverness, is considered the greatest virtue. Murder is never an acceptable policy, although disgrace and charges of "heresy" often render violence unnecessary. Drab robes and ceremonial vestments make fashion a moot point, and flirtations between the sexes are strictly forbidden. Celibate clergymen are not allowed to have wives or direct heirs; succession is supposed to be decided by merit and seniority. Of course, during the Renaissance, many leading clerics flagrantly disregard their vows, and may actually have offspring (usually tactfully referred to as "nephews") working around their palaces. Nuns, of course, face shame or exile if they're found to be pregnant, but "orphans" tend to show up a lot around convents, and many seem to resemble Church officials.

In fact, in the popular, scurrilous imagination (and hence, in some Dark Fantastic chronicles), decadent "church courts" are the worst of the worst. After all, the king may keep a mistress without being a terribly bad man otherwise, but a bishop who does the same thing is violating a sacred vow. And with *one* such sin to his name... well, orgies and other debauchery seem pretty much inevitable. Conversely, the palaces of devout and fanatical churchmen may be rather *forbidding* places, saturated with austere piety and blazing with True Faith. Such literally sacred ground may be poison to many sorcerers, and the church folk who inhabit it are sure to be sturdy enemies of witchcraft....

Courts of Magick

At the other end of the spectrum, some courts revolve around magick. The Hermetic Covenants, the great realms of Doissetep and Horizon, the two White Towers, and countless other sanctuaries accept "miracles" as the norm. In distant citadels and gargantuan workshops, magick and high science create fiefdoms of their own. While such courts tend to follow many of the mortal patterns, there *are* several differences worth noting.

First of all, most wizardly courts are fairly isolated. Exceptions exist, like the Black Alley of Prague or the various guild halls across Europe, but for the most part, the Awakened prefer to be discreet. Thus, wizard-courts remain relatively independent of mortal politics — the king of England has little influence in Horizon. Every so often, mortal wars spill across the borders, especially during Shallowings or odd holidays. Mortal rulers still command loyalty from Awakened subjects, too; King Henry might not be able to send troops into Horizon, but English magi might well cross swords with French ones on their king's behalf. For the most part, though, such courts are ruled by magi, or by Daedalean masters. The more remote the court is from mundane humanity, the more powerful the magi will be.

And they can be *quite* powerful! Magickal courts are often wondrous places — castles of ice, floating cities, libraries that would shame bygone Alexandria, and so forth. In realms where magick or high science literally shape the world to suit their masters, anything can happen. Courtiers in magickal worlds can (and do) employ all manner of sorcery. The only real limits are the governing masters, the wizard's skill, and the nature of the realm itself.

The nature of that realm is vitally important. Using the "wrong" magicks in such a place can be disastrous. Otherworldly courts and realms tend to "favor" certain practices; a witch will feel right at home in a coven garden, where an Artificer's Arts are vain; drop her into his lodge, however, and the tables turn.... (In game terms, the "right" styles of magick are considered casual around the court, while really inappropriate ones are vain. The Storyteller should decide, based on the realm and its rulers, which styles of magick are "correct," and which are vain. See the rulebook, pp. 262-265, for system details.)

As one might assume, wizard-courts tend to be governed by wizards. Again, the people at the top will depend on the nature of the court. In an ancient Hermetic hall, powerful magi set the rules; in a High Guild lodge, shrewd "Black Uncles" decide policy and dictate protocol. Formal charters and mystick pacts set the rules for such lands, and status depends more on experience or seniority than on royal birth. Most magickal courts house a *group* of sorcerers, too; although an arch-magus might have a tower of his own, councils usually govern large estates. In the case of the great strongholds of Horizon and the White Tower, the ruling councils contain members from each sect or Convention. In "private" courts, where a single sect dominates, most of the rulers hail from that sect (although token members from other groups may be tolerated).

Even in these strange realms, however, true sorcerers are rare. It's one thing to be familiar with magick, quite another to actually master it. And in many cases, the magi are far too busy mastering their Arts, teaching apprentices and waging campaigns to tend to everyday concerns. And so, mortals (along with the occasional spirit or magical beast) handle many of the usual servant's chores. These consors, grogs, brethren and so forth occupy many of the same offices as their counterparts back home. The advantages of this Otherworldly employment include safety and the chance to work hand-in-hand with wonders. The downside includes an additional level of separation; unless a mortal servant Awakens (and is recognized and trained as a magus), he'll be one step below the apprentices, even if he happens to be the highest-ranking mortal in the realm. And if a magus goes berserk, her first victims may well be mortal servitors.

Because of the raw power of its residents, a magickal court needs firm protocols. In most cases, the ruler or council has enough personal power to enforce the laws; by

agreement, even old rivals unite to defeat someone who threatens the realm itself. Magickal amusements, diversions, quests and duels bleed off excess tension, and allow the residents to get along with minimal fuss. If something truly goes wrong, every magus in the court (hopefully) turns his or her full resources toward solving the problem. Internal bickering can be resolved later.

But therein lies the greatest weakness of a wizardly court: the vanity of power. Many a realm has fallen because its inhabitants turned on one another, or refused to help when help was needed. For all their Arts and knowledge, magi are still people. Aside from the few wizards raised totally away from humankind, the Awakened are very much products of their ancestral lands. Hence, worldly institutions like royalty, prejudice, selfishness, and occasional slavery remain the rule in these distant realms. Even magick, it seems, can accomplish only so much when human beings have made up their minds about How Things Should Be.

The Ways of Court Life

We are inclined to counsel you to try everything possible to avoid open warfare. All terms to avert conflict should be weighed by you, and such caution must be more praised than censured. To conserve that state is to conserve honor.

— Isabella d'Este

With their combination of large-scale domestic arrangements, politics and business, courts are complex, bustling places wherein one must know the rules in order to survive — or at least, to avoid being disgraced. Blueblood courtiers have it relatively easy; budding ladies and gentlemen are literally raised from birth learning etiquette, poise, history and subterfuge. Common-born people get to know their places by trial and error. The "school of hard knocks" applies literally in either case. Lessons in protocol are more often taught by the rod than by soft words.

In old-fashioned households, most folk are born to their position — the chancellor, maids and soldiers are all probably doing much the same jobs their parents did. The Middle Ages were not, one might say, particularly democratic. Still, even within this ancient pattern, there *are* ways to rise to distinction. A loyal soldier can always find employment, especially under a warlike king; a beautiful, clever mistress can run circles around royal advisors *without* having to bed them all; and any priest with the aptitude to learn can go far indeed. The Church, after all, gives its people a decent education (including full literacy); once within *that* system, a smart peasant-boy can rise fairly high, while a scholar-priest from a modest merchant family can come within mere strides of the throne.

In the Renaissance, things are becoming more flexible still. Philosophy declares that human abilities, not Divine favor, set the measure of a man. Under this ideal, craftsmen, poets, artists and soldiers from very humble backgrounds sometimes rise to positions of note. Even so, birth remains important. "The blood will tell," as the expression goes, and even the most Humanistic physicians declare that breeding means far more than achievement.

Gaining Admittance

So how can, say, a peasant character gain entry to a great house? Within limits, quite easily. As mentioned earlier, a large household needs plenty of food and fuel, so farm carts often come and go. Unless the lord of the manor has some reason to order precautions, a person can easily slip into the place with a delivery. On the other hand, passing from the "under-stairs" kitchens and servants' quarters to the rulers' private rooms is harder; a change of clothes is just the beginning. Finding long-term employment in a great house often takes a bit of luck; the kitchens may need a boy to turn the spit, the guards may be short-handed, or the steward may want an extra game-keeper. Even then, though, such posts will usually be filled by personal recommendations, not by one-on-one interviews. Feasts and celebrations may grant wandering entertainers an entrance into the great hall, but strolling players are regarded as rogues and vagabonds, and will probably be watched by some sour-faced marshal or butler.

Matters are easier for people of higher rank; the upper classes value exchanges of hospitality, and highborn folks enjoy hearing news of their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, traveling lords often find some way to claim a bed for the night. Priests, too, can usually gain admittance into any court. A bishop will be treated much like a secular lord, while even the humblest friar will *probably* be treated with courtesy — it's generally assumed that being polite to such godly folk gains one the approval of Heaven. (Not that people assume that all clerics are saintly; there are plenty of jokes about grasping priests and lascivious monks. But clergy should be treated with respect to their faces, even so. If God has issues with their behavior, *He* can take the matter up with them!)

People who have *recently* risen from common backgrounds to power and wealth complicate matters a great deal. A newly-rich merchant may well have to recruit servants and guards wherever he can find them, and while he's probably a good judge of character (most successful merchants are), his staff is liable to be a pretty mixed bunch. Naturally, the bluebloods look down on these newcomers; in aristocratic courts, there's a lot of snobbery based on "old names," and people assume that "truly noble" families have some kind of divine favor that puts them above the rabble. A rich peasant, to many noble lords, is still a peasant. Still,

that rich peasant has his uses. As the Middle Ages give way to the Renaissance, wealth and influence begin to mean far more than pure breeding, if only because the newly-rich have begun rewriting the rules with gold.

No matter what a person's birth might be, hospitality is often the rule at court. Remember, the Holiday Inn won't be invented for centuries, and traveler's lodges are expensive and far between. So long as a visitor pays proper respect to the lord or lady of the house, brings something useful (gossip, labor, money) to the table, and isn't an obvious vagabond or thief, a place will probably be found for the newcomer. He may have to eat at the low end of the table, and sleep far away from the family quarters, but he'll likely receive a good cut of meat and a comfortable bed. In great trading cities, especially in Italy, the rules are even more relaxed; here, snobbery is based more on money and ability and less on ancestry.

Women

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart of a king, and of a king of England, too.

— Queen Elizabeth I

To all appearances, court is a man's world. With the exceptions of queens and other highborn wives, men hold all the major offices. Succession always favors sons over daughters. Affairs of Church, state, law, war and medicine are practiced almost exclusively by men; the few women who "intrude" in these domains are challenged, excluded, and even burned.

So where do the women fit in? That depends a good deal on the court or household in question. Old-style castles and fortresses, especially those guarding frontiers and warzones, are run as garrisons — and fighting is men's business. Aside from the lord's wife and her small retinue of attendants, there won't be many women in residence. (There will, of course, be the requisite "camp followers" nearby, but these women would *not* be considered part of the household.) That said, a few castles are left in the hands of widows or wives while the lords are away — and, when war comes, some such ladies become legendary for their defiance and skill.

At the other end of the scale, town houses and country manors have many female residents; here, women often outnumber the men (who have a terrible habit of dying in fights, for some odd reason). Although they could hardly be called "equal" in the eyes of the law, women from the merchant and noble classes are trained from birth to manage households. A good many of them are sharp accountants and shrewd merchants, and all possess useful skills. Some even train in their family professions, becoming artists, blacksmiths, physicians and courtiers. No matter where you are, the lady of the house is due respect — or else!

Costumes and Fashion

First impressions count. Among courtiers and merchants who can afford more than a basic peasant's smock, your choice of clothing — the first thing most folk notice about a stranger — may create very specific impressions. Besides, it's a common fact that people feel more confident in stylish or impressive clothes; he who dresses like a king may well find himself acting royally. Experts in *Ars Cupiditae* (see Item, Third) are keenly aware of the power of the right (or wrong) choice of clothing. When preparing their subtle yet powerful Mind workings, these courtiers pay close attention to the clothing they select for an occasion.

Both **Crusade Lore** and **The Sorcerers Crusade Companion** describe the general styles and clothing within the Dark Fantastic period (see pp. 42-44 and 15-17, respectively). Readers should look there for details, but note that details change quite frequently. As living standards rise and merchants seek out rare fabrics from far lands, Europe witnesses the invention of the modern idea of fashion. Before the Renaissance, clothing was practical and fashions evolved over time, if at all. Renaissance dress, in contrast, changes from year to year, often for no reason other than novelty. Cloth is probably second only to spices in its importance to long-distance trade in this era. This obsession with display all seems rather trivial, of course — unless you're literally in the business of making impressions. In that case, fashion-sense is as important as a mystickal grimoire.

Even un-Enlightened folk notice the power of fashion. Some influential courtiers try to control the business, introducing "sumptuary laws" to decide who can wear what, and when (and to prevent upstarts from aping their betters). Meanwhile, moralists rail against the new fashions, especially elements, like padded codpieces on men or low necklines on women, designed to flaunt wearers' sexuality. People of means, of course, ignore both the laws and the lamentations. Despite nasty penalties and expensive "fashion wars," elaborate clothing soon rule the courts.

Even military garb has its fashions. Rough-and-tumble mercenaries who wear tattered clothing out of necessity inspire the slash-sleeve trend, which offers the impression that the wearer is a tough fellow who can handle himself in a duel. (While flaunting expensively colorful under-shirts, no less!) Showy dress can serve psychological as well as practical purposes in battle, too; for example, ornate armor can intimidate opponents, and that advantage might outweigh the discomfort and risk that wearing it entails.

Make-up, too, becomes an important accessory. Although they have not yet reached the lead paste-and-syphilis extremes of 17th and 18th-century courts, cosmetics and perfumes are essential to a good courtier. (If only because Europeans bathe so infrequently.) Women cultivate pale complexions with powder and lotion, and accent "bedroom eyes" with belladonna tinctures. Applied to nipples and cheeks, bright rouge adds a "healthy," lustful glow. Fans — which grow in proportion to tight corsets and layered clothing — become signaling devices as well, and an elaborate sign language evolves around the flutter and fold of a lady's fan.

Men accent their sexual attributes also; stuffed and colored codpieces vie with musky scents and ruddy make-up. Thick wigs attest to a man's virility, and sometimes cover oily or lice-ridden scalps. As tobacco smoking makes its way across the Atlantic, the pipe and cigarette join essential masculine attire. For those with the skill and nerve to wear them, slender swords and daggers compliment a man's finery, assuring potential rivals (and lovers) that he's a dangerous fellow indeed!

All these clothes have to come *from* somewhere, of course. Hence, this age sees the rise of tailoring as a serious and intricate craft. (Buttonholes were adopted from the Moors around 1250, and the business has been getting more complicated ever since.) In the courtly arena, a good tailor or dressmaker can be a *seriously* useful contact. But then, money is important, too. However friendly that tailor might be, good materials don't come cheap.

Sometimes, a swashbuckling type simply has to ditch the garb. It's pretty hard to scale a wall or swim a moat in a corset! Many spies and courtly agents have clothes designed for quick shedding (see Item, Third); if nothing else, a well-placed blade (or Matter-based spell) can drop a few layers of excess clothing. In a similar vein, brightly-colored court fashions can be a real hindrance for a courtier who doesn't want to be seen. Fortunately, a dark cloak is almost always fashionable — and it looks great for that dramatic leap from the battlements! Remember, while high fashion and skullduggery sometimes make odd bedfellows, there's one real reason why swashbuckling and fashion go together:

They're both about style.



Few, if any, European lords maintain harems like those of the Muslim east, where wives and daughters are entirely locked away from the outside. Some come close, though. Wealth enables men with little trust and narrow ideas about “feminine honor” to keep their immediate female family from contact with the world. Even in Europe, though, “common wisdom” claims women are sensual and lazy by nature. While that’s hardly an accurate assessment, it’s often considered literally Gospel truth, even by educated men... and worse still, by many women, too. Indeed, few men can oppress a woman the way her mother, nurse, and peers can manage. Other ladies, after all, dictate how “good ladies” should behave, and any girl who bucks her status must fight the tide of her own femininity.

At worst, high-ranking women are treated as mindless decorations and baby machines. At best, they’re considered bonny playfriends, but insidious threats. The double standard is very much in force, so men are admired for their skill in seduction, while women must preserve their modesty; women with a taste for “courtly love,” such as Marguerite of Angoulême, must tread carefully and recall that discretion and secrecy are part of the game.

Meanwhile, marriages are taking place a little later than in previous centuries; girls are no longer necessarily married off the *moment* they reach puberty. This, in turn, creates a category of unmarried upper-class girls who attract — or pursue — romantic attention. Much as this state of affairs (literally!) appeals to poets, it’s a concern for fathers and brothers, who are quick to put hands on swords when the girls receive too much admiration. Sadly, many (though not all) noble girls are considered bargaining chips in the family’s fortunes. They might marry well, or badly, but rarely do they marry a man of their own choosing.

Women among the servants and peasantry can’t afford fastidious modesty, of course, and they enjoy a bit more freedom than their upper-class sisters do. (This is true even in lands where the harem is commonplace; in fact, there’s a whole class of female brokers in the Muslim world, who handle trade between harem and bazaar.) Upper-class rakes often consider such women legitimate prey, but the women themselves may have their own ideas about correct behavior. In story terms, this sexual hide-and-seek can lead both to tragedies (wherein arrogant rakes exploit and abandon servant-girls) and comedies (in which quick-witted girls evade and embarrass upper-class lechers).

And then there are the women who exploit their sexuality, either out of necessity or, very occasionally, with free-spirited flair. In this age, a streetwalker’s life is pretty dismal; a few harlots gain positions (pun intended) in brothels, or become mistresses to powerful men, but most age badly and die miserably. Free-love advocates (and there *are* quite a few of them, even now) prefer to keep their affairs discreet, or to work as spies or professional muses, inspiring and modeling for the poets and painters of the age. Some

randy wenches, like the infamous Lucrezia Borgia, become serial wives or mistresses, keeping stables of husbands and lovers under their command. It's an uncertain life — there are no guarantees — but a smart, lucky mistress can stockpile money, true affection, and even political influence in ways no man could dare to dream of.

Near the very highest levels, true courtesans — generally women with some education — attain a substantial, if precarious, place in society. Not every city has such ladies, but some, like Venice, become famous (or infamous) for their beautiful and charming courtesans. The greatest courtesans, like Veronica Franco, become celebrities, patrons of the arts, even artists in their own right. Courtesans lead precarious lives; age, disease, or bad luck can reduce them to poverty. Even so, very few women in this era enjoy the freedom of movement and influence that Italian courtesans sometimes attain.

And then there are the royal wives, mothers, nurses, noblewomen, abbesses, and other “matron” figures — the literal and symbolic mothers of the kingdom. Every nobleman, no matter how pigheaded he might be, has a mother. A strong woman — and most female courtiers are *quite* strong, thank you — can command the throne by sheer force of personality, simply by playing the Mother card, the Mistress card, or both. Powerful queens, like Isabella or Elizabeth, become, in effect, married to their kingdoms; lesser noblewomen become matriarchs of their own domains.

If nothing else, noble women hold the key to succession. Without wives, there are no legitimate heirs. Without heirs, there are no legacies; without legacies, kingdoms fall to ruins. While this fact might suggest that all women are slaves to the state, quite the opposite is true. Women might be denigrated in the law books and the pulpit, but without them, not even the most medieval courts could function.

Foreigners

Nationalism is still a fairly new idea in the 15th century; thus, a foreigner will encounter fewer problems than one might expect — up to a point, anyway — when she arrives at court. A king or lord will regard someone of similar rank from a neighboring land as an equal, and perhaps converse with her in a “courtly” language such as French, or Latin, the scholars’ tongue. (Even a clever noble may know only a smattering of Latin, however; most negotiations end up being conducted in a bastard mix of two half-known languages.) The Church transcends national boundaries, and all priests *supposedly* speak Latin, while merchants cannot afford much open prejudice (though they may consider people of different nationalities rather difficult customers). And in busy trade-towns like Venice or Prague, courtiers, servants and even citizens have seen enough foreigners to ease most cultural shocks.

All is not peace and love, however; most peasants, and even many landowner-knights, know very little about what lies beyond their home village. To these folk, any stranger is peculiar — and if the stranger doesn’t speak the language all *honest* folk do, it proves he’s more than a little bit sinister.

Even the greatest tolerance of foreigners has its limits, too. Firstly, this is an age of religious conflict; Catholics in Protestant lands, and vice-versa, have problems ranging from the trivial to the fatal. Non-Christians have to tread *very* carefully in Christian lands, and non-Muslims are considered somewhat unclean, even if they’re fellow “people of the Book.” (Jews are sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted, under both religions.) All “outlanders” from wild areas are assumed to be ignorant barbarians, even if they supposedly follow the “right” religion. And while everyone likes to hear odd stories about those distant lands, no one wants a savage at the dinner table!

Perfumes Cover Only so Much

By the standards of the Far and Middle East, even the grandest courts of Europe are indescribably filthy. Dogs vie for table scraps, lice scabble through courtiers’ hair, unwashed bodies pack the rooms, and the gutter-stench of fermented grapes (forbidden to Allah’s people) and rotted hops thickens the very air. Italy, Spain and most Jewish communities preserve some semblance of the ancient customs of bathing and hygiene, and provide exceptions to the rule. Most visitors from distant lands, though, will feel quite uncomfortable. Naturally, this isn’t something you’ll usually want to play up in a swashbuckling chronicle — by European standards, most courts are immaculate — but it can provide all kinds of fun for groups where visiting Batini, Akashics, Ngoma, or other dignitaries must suffer the dubious “hospitality” of European hosts.

Conversely, the faraway courts of the Ottoman Empire, Songhai, Cathay, and so forth seem alien to Europeans. Strange scents and spices seem to drift through the air as barefoot, oddly mutilated servants attend the guests. Strange creatures — monkeys, camels, even elephants — take the place of dogs and horses, and the women eat in separate chambers (whether they like it or not). Adventurers used to comely wenches will be very disappointed; in many places, women are veiled and swathed in bright but concealing garments. The exceptions, dancing slaves and concubines, are scandalous by contrast; even then, however, strict customs enforce a certain distance. Alcoholic drinks will be painfully hard to find in many locales, too. The host may even demand regular hot baths from his guests! Thus, a European visitor will be hard-pressed to enjoy his stay.

Such are the courts of those accursed *barbarians*!

Slaves

Incidentally, slavery is not entirely unknown in Europe in this age, especially in the lands around the Mediterranean. Nor is it limited to galley-slaves and other such wretches. Slaves in Italy are often taken from Eastern Europe, while Spanish and Portuguese traders bring captives from Africa and the New World. For the most part, though, Europe holds few "slaves" as such; there are no great plantations in these lands, and besides, serfs work just as well, and at less cost to the landowner. Serfdom aside, though, outright slavery (of Christians, at least) is illegal in many kingdoms. Although Europeans will continue to keep slaves on other continents for centuries, they apparently feel uncomfortable with the idea at home.

That being said, it's not uncommon for a lord or merchant to keep a few "servants" chained in his dungeons at night. Granted, he's not likely to have purchased them at a public auction, but orphans, young bastards, urchins and stepchildren often seem to turn into convenient "labor sources" when no one's paying attention. (Remember Cinderella?)

Elsewhere in the world, of course — in Russia, the Muslim lands, China and Africa, in particular — there are a wide variety of slave-owning systems. Such "servants" are often treated better than the African slaves of a later day, but while they might accept their lot in life, they rarely enjoy it. Sadly, slavery of one form or another is pretty common in the Dark Fantastic world. If you need to introduce a character from a very distant land, slavery could provide a great story-hook... and motivate her to get the hell out of her present circumstances.

Knowing the Dance

You will soon learn who has a good or an evil reputation. With the latter avoid any great intimacy, not only on your own account, but for the sake of public opinion; converse in a general way with all.

— Lorenzo di Medici, from a letter to his son Giovanni

So-called "Renaissance men" earn that name for good reason. As new arts and ideas flourish, most rulers try to distinguish themselves from their mud-spattered forebears. By the mid-1400s, courtiers and sycophants cultivate proper manners, personal flare, and intellectual achievement. As always, the reality rarely lives up to the ideal, but courts are places where ideals become manifest. And so, as the ideals soar higher and higher, courtly behavior rises likewise... or at least tries to, anyway.

In essence, the laws of court are fairly simple:

- Be charming, witty and erudite if you can, silent if you cannot.
- Be of good breeding, and act accordingly. If you're *not* of good breeding, try to act like an honest servant, not a barbarian.
- Find your talents, and nurture them to the fullest. If you're a merchant, be a great merchant. If you can be only a soldier, then be the best soldier in the land.

- Respect your betters, and be kind to your inferiors.
 - Fear neither man nor ghost nor rumor; fear only God, your lord, and the loss of honor.
 - Never, by word or deed, risk the safety of the kingdom.
 - Your sovereign is always right, even when he appears to be wrong. For the sovereign embodies the kingdom, and the kingdom is sacrosanct.
 - The host is always right. (Unless, of course, your sovereign disagrees with the host.)
 - Never forget your place in society. Try to improve it, but do not insult your betters in the process.
 - Never make a spectacle of yourself. If you do, make it look good. (Even then, however, your host might not be pleased.)
 - Honor beauty, which manifests perfection, and nurture it when you can.
 - Likewise, shun ugliness, which manifests corruption. Avoid it, drive it away, or try to change it into beauty.
 - Conduct yourself with grace and confidence, but shun arrogance — it's unseeingly.
 - Medieval manners — licking your fingers, spitting on the floor, slurping soup, grinding your teeth, etc. — are to be avoided in good company.
 - Dress well and neatly, according to your station. Clothing reflects taste, and taste reflects the heart.
 - Be honest, strong, and wise — or at least appear to be so.
 - Show neither greed, nor envy, nor rage, nor sorrow. Wear a mask upon your heart, and let it display only what you *choose* to show.
 - Improve yourself with constant challenges. When you lose — and you will — do so with grace and humility.
 - Suffer no man's insults. Bear a *woman's* insults, but be sure to maintain your honor in the process.
 - If and when your honor is besmirched, do whatever it takes to redeem it.
 - Practice the study of arms (if a man) or the fine arts of eloquence and charm (if a woman).
 - Let reason, not superstition, be your guide. (You can see how this rule might present a problem to wizards in the midst.)
- Like a *maresca*, this dance seems deceptively simple. When one tries to master the steps in time to the music, however, the complexity of the dance becomes clear. No mortal can live up to all the courtly ideals — *especially* not a mortal involved in politics! But the dance demands grace, and so courtiers try to move with as much style as they can manage.
- The precise steps in this dance vary from court to court, and often from season to season. Few people could ever hope to master them all, and those who *do* manage spend their whole lives keeping up with the changes. The most important aspects of courtly behavior can be summed up simply: *Look good, act well, honor your liege, and don't let anyone else insult you.* The specifics, however, can be dizzying.

In game terms, a character needs the Skill: *Etiquette* just to keep up with the dance. Other Traits, like Artist, Expression, Subterfuge, Leadership, Dancing and Seduction, can help compensate for a lack of manners. Anyone who wants to remain at court for long, however, had better learn etiquette quickly, so players whose magi lack the appropriate Trait should spend experience points on it as soon as possible.

Every court has its hierarchies, too — it's insiders, outcasts, pawns and players. For the most part, a character will have to learn who's who by observation, although a friend, a helpful Merit or Background, a few well-placed Entropy and Mind spells, or all of the above will certainly help. As any courtier can attest, it's vital to recognize your partners in the dance. In court, after all, a misstep can be disastrous.

Punishments

This is the Bastille. There is no "afterwards."

— Comte de Rochefort, *The Three Musketeers*

If a court has rules — and it always does — there must be penalties for those who break them. And when there are intrigues afoot, the various parties must have ways of dealing with their enemies... permanently, and otherwise.

Gallows, Rack and Dungeon

In the crudest cases, the offended parties simply turn their rivals over to the law. Medieval practices are still very much in force, and a good public (or not-so-public) execution is still fun and legal. With or without magick, it's an easy thing to have someone taken down by the authorities... especially if you happen to be the authorities.

While Renaissance law is a little more refined than the medieval version, its penalties are still quite, well, medieval. Few lands or rulers have abandoned the thumbscrew and hot irons, and some enjoy coming up with... inventive... ways of inflicting pain. As kingdoms become nations, many rulers devise new and hideous punishments as public displays of power. Although many noble folk are granted the dignity of a quick beheading, the English practice of hanging, drawing and quartering (in which a man is publicly dragged behind horses, choked, stretched, eviscerated, dismembered alive, then beheaded) becomes a standard punishment for treason.

A character who has been caught breaking an important written law can usually expect death (fast or slow, depending on the crime, the legal system, and the social class of the criminal), or at least banishment. This last has the advantage of placing a minor enemy, or one who has too many friends to be killed safely, out of the way without bloodshed. The drawback? Exile allows an enemy to plot against you from a distance — unless, of course, he suffers a tragic "accident" far from home. Some courtiers choose to

flee their homelands *before* they get caught doing something wrong. For such instances, a wise courtier makes plenty of friends abroad. After all, that contact in Prague may come in handy someday if you need to track down an enemy who has fled there... or in case you need to flee there yourself.

Long-term imprisonment is fairly unusual in this era, unless you're too important to kill outright. For most lawbreakers, a gaol exists for interrogation, punishment, and a brief rest before execution. Major political or military figures, however, might be held for ransom, or as hostages for some forthcoming deal. Sometimes, royal folk hesitate to shed royal blood, partly out of sentiment (it's a hard thing to kill your brother), political reasons (it doesn't make you look very good, either), or both. In that case, the detainee could be imprisoned for years or even decades, like Mary, Queen of Scots. Depending on the circumstances, such imprisonment could be fairly pleasant (confined, but not imprisoned), generally unpleasant (locked in a cell, but otherwise unmolested), or downright hellish (like the Man in the Iron Mask). Even under the best of circumstances, though, a captured courtier lives under the Sword of Damocles. Who knows when, or if, the captor will decide to take care of his "guest" permanently? Imprisonment, even the "good" kind, cuts a character off from the rest of the world. The uncertainty itself becomes a form of subtle but implacable torture... and it's supposed to be.

(*Storytellers Note:* Oh, and yes, most gaolers *do* take precautions against magick when their "guests" are suspected sorcerers. This is an age of witchcraft, after all, and one can never be too careful. See "Commonfolk Magics" in the rulebook, p. 267; if all else fails, chains, crosses and branding irons are said to be *quite* efficacious.)

Common criminals whose offences are too serious for fines or religious penance, but not severe enough for capital punishment, are usually branded, stocked, whipped, or otherwise mutilated. Subjecting a noble prisoner to such treatment is a major insult, however, and usually isn't worth the risk of retaliation. Still, it's worth noting that most lords will have a gaoler or two who's clever with hot irons, even if that lord is generally pleasant and humane by the standards of the age.

Blades and Goblets

There's always the direct approach, of course. Many a courtier has simply had her underlings beat a rival senseless, or dropped a bit of "Borgia diplomacy" into an enemy's drink. Such tactics are risky, of course — murder is murder, no matter who you are — but they *do* get the job done quickly. Magi, with their mysterious Arts, can take their rivals down quietly and with little trouble. But what can be done to others can be done to you also, and few court sorcerers are easily recognizable for what they are.

In most cases, a courtier will send dupes off to do her dirty work. Even in rough-and-tumble courts, rulers tend to take a dim view of things when their aides off each other on a regular basis, so discretion is always the better part of treachery. In game terms, a "hit" provides an excellent opportunity to spice the story up with some combat without breaking the mood, or killing the main antagonists before things get interesting. Naturally, any noble plotter augments her hired ruffians with a few competent, loyal enforcers. In *The Three Musketeers*, Cardinal Richelieu — with his guardsmen and his agents de Rochefort and de Winter — provides the perfect model for a courtier who can backstab his opponents without ever soiling his hands personally. Of course, the Cardinal's agents constantly lose to d'Artagnan, but perhaps the Musketeer is just lucky...

Some courtiers, like Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, or "Prince" Cesare Borgia, enjoy getting their hands dirty. Cultivating a fierce reputation, they literally cross blades with their enemies one-on-one, and usually win. This tends to be risky; Cesare had money, charisma, great strength, and the Pope on his side, but still died at 31. Even so, it scares the hell out of one's enemies. Agents of the Rose Guild are specially trained to handle their problems personally, either with poison, blades or *Ars Cupiditae*. And as their rivals can attest (the living ones, anyway), these courtiers are frighteningly good at their jobs.

And then there's the old standby, poison. Many noblemen wear ruby and coral rings for a reason — such charms supposedly protect one against liquid treachery. (Sometimes, they even work; see Item, Third.) Alchemists, apothecaries, and old witch-women maintain booming — if illegal — trades in poison; even monks experiment with the stuff, if only out of curiosity. Naturally, poison is deeply forbidden. No lawmaker wants to drop dead after supper, so poisoners are executed in the most horrible ways imaginable. (Roasting and burning are fairly common sentences; one assassin, though, was smeared with honey, tied into holes cut in the bottom of a boat, and left to rot in the sun, eaten by flies on top and fish underneath. He took over a week to die.) This doesn't keep courtiers and their agents from employing the fatal draught, however. Indeed, some courts feature "arms races" in which the various courtiers secretly try to outdo each other with the style and lethality of their brews. Let the diner beware!

(Note: The main rulebook features system and Storytelling details about poisons on pp. 98, 190-191, and 201-202; *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion* includes an Appendix full of toxins on pp. 175-177.)

Shame and Ostracism

Not all courtly conflicts are about law or death, however, and defeat can take many forms. In an age that (supposedly) combines medieval honor and chivalry with new sophistication and wit, one's reputation and social standing are exceedingly important. Sometimes, humiliation can be punishment enough.

Despite the extravagant manners described in Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, this isn't yet the age of perfected status-games, of Voltaire, *Dangerous Liaisons* and *Ridicule*. Even so, an old-fashioned sense of honor can make disgrace painful, and social status and access to power can give ostracism a nasty bite indeed. Social punishments are very useful in court; they teach offenders a lesson without getting blood on the carpet, and often cut them off from their power base as well.

Social ostracism involves making your rival look so bad in the eyes of her peers that she essentially becomes her own worst enemy. You could make her look like a fool, a dolt, a heretic, or even a traitor. The rumor could be true (see *Dangerous Liaisons*) or false (see *Much Ado About Nothing*), but it should be memorable enough and damaging enough to cause a lasting scandal — with potentially serious complications.

In times and places where strict formality (or morality) holds sway, a woman may be disgraced if she seems guilty of sexually dishonorable behavior; a man, in turn, can be ruined by accusations of cowardice. When a strong-willed or exceptionally fashionable monarch, like Henry VIII or Marguerite of Navarre dominates the court, the mere *hint* of royal distaste can utterly destroy a lesser being. And in especially dissolute, fashion-obsessed courts, defeat in matters of wit and style can instantly lead to social disaster (see *Ridicule*).

A courtier can recover from disgrace in various ways, depending on the atmosphere and nature of the court. Leaders of fashion and wit often have poor memories, so time may heal social wounds and personal accomplishments may win one a reprieve. In cases where some *specific* social crime was involved, the victim or her friends may be able to disprove the charge logically; this can provide an excuse for a detective-style plot within a game. In some cases, the pariah may appeal to an ally for help. This may or may not work, and it *will* cost! (See the Flaw: *Beholden*.) If all else fails, a disgraced person can always win her way back into favor through some great accomplishment or adventure — possibly turning the disgrace against her enemies in the process. Respect, after all, is a fluid commodity, and rarely stays fixed for long.

In certain instances, nothing can wipe away the stain. Some scandals are too serious or memorable to forget — or grow even worse in the telling. At this point, a "fallen" woman may retire to a nunnery or remote country estate, while a man fights a series of duels, or flees abroad. It's often possible to evade shame by moving to another court, but this doesn't always work; gossip travels damnably well in this era, especially if minstrels or magick are involved. Sometimes, social death seems as permanent as the real kind.

Extreme disgrace may occasionally cause someone a *formal* loss of status, too. This is usually rare; titles of nobility or fellowship in some prestigious order are hard things to take away. (Nobles don't want whimsical kings playing havoc with their titles.) Mere mundane crimes — theft, assault, murder, rape — may be punished by law, assuming the law can touch

the aristocrat. Generally, though, titles are only revoked in cases of witchcraft or high treason — for attacking the very system that awarded the titles, or the monarch who leads it.

Reputation and standing are every bit as important among merchants and businessmen as they are among nobles, albeit in slightly different ways. Contract law is relatively primitive at this date, and deals are usually made on faith and trust. Note that around this time, certain bankers and goldsmiths have begun to introduce paper money to Europe — and that's based on nothing *but* trust. Thus, a tradesman's reputation is everything. Ruin that, and you attack his very livelihood. While an old-fashioned aristocrat would say that a good name is far more important than money, a merchant prince would reply that *making* money and *using* money depend on having a good name.

So if you want to destroy a merchant's life, spread rumors that his credit is bad, or that his ventures have failed. (As in *The Merchant of Venice*.) If he's any sort of *competent* merchant, though, those rumors might not be believed; they might even backfire and win sympathy for him. Either way, you can expect that he and his friends will hear about the rumors and come after you — in most cases, with blades, sometimes with lawyers, occasionally with both. In this age and place, it's sometimes safer to offend a noble lady than a businessman. The noble may be more willing to forgive.

Blood and Thunder: The Roll of the Dice

Most stories focus on conflict of some kind, and courtly stories are no exception. Within the formal, sheltered world of the court, conflicts with nature or bitter fate are rare; most struggles pit you against other people. There are many different ways to resolve these conflicts, of course; physical violence is one possibility, but one that should be kept in reserve. These are sophisticated times, you know, and drawing your sword at the feast seems terribly crass.

Crossed Swords

Noblemen are expected to defend themselves, their families, land, and honor with steel if necessary — but laws and government are supposed to remove that necessity. Sensible rulers avoid bloodshed in the court: it's a waste of useful courtiers, promotes violent solutions, and diverts attention away from important court business. (It's also really bad for diplomacy; forging an alliance gets difficult if your chamberlain guts the ambassador.) This realization displays one of the main differences between a medieval court and a Renaissance one; in this enlightened era, a safe and sturdy nation is considered more important — more *rational* — than a warrior's playground. There will always be a place for war, naturally, but the old idea of rulership at sword-point is giving way to the concept that the kingdom is more important than the crown.

Of course, given the tenor of the times, bloodshed still occurs — so it is regulated. Duels are not quite as formal now as they will become in a century or two, but they still have rules and etiquette. A duel, legal or otherwise, usually consists of the two parties stepping outside the building and having at each other with whatever blades they chance to be wearing; even now, though, formal codes have already appeared. Challenges must be open and explicit; weapons must be fairly evenly matched; third parties may attempt to reconcile the opponents before the fight, and without disgrace to either party; and fights may well end at first blood or first yield. (In the later Renaissance, however, weapons will be *precisely* matched, favored combat techniques will be designed specifically for dueling, and men will die over the fashionable length of a cuff.)

None of which means that game-stories cannot include combats at court; indeed, in the narrowest sense of the term, “swashbuckling” adventures involve little else. For those moments when blades call the tune, see the classic stunts described in Appendix I, and the fencing sections the rulebook (pp. 197-198) and *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion* (pp. 163-173). However, violent conflicts — formal duels or freeform confrontations — should be rare, the highlights of the story, not routine amusements for jaded players who want to work off their frustrations. Swashbuckling is all about *class*. So, from a story point of view, save the glittering blades for important moments, and let charm and intrigue carry the day. Characters who reach for a weapon — whether a broadsword, a rapier, or a Daedalean repeating pistol — will be treated as little more than ruffians. They may crush all their opponents in combat, but they'll find little help or friendship at court.

Sharp Words

Plenty of courtly conflicts are completely resolved with nary a drop of blood. Clever judgement, fine words, and a bit of sexual seduction can make pretty effective weapons at court. Many courtiers are more famous for their deadly wits than for their swordsmanship. This, too, marks a difference between Renaissance “high society stories” and other, less subtle courtly tales.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to handle in a game. Players are comfortable with their characters aiming guns or working magick — that's just a question of rolling dice — but subtle social interactions are supposed to involve roleplaying and speaking in character. *That* can get tricky. Oh, you can roll contests of Manipulation + Expression or Wits + Etiquette, but it's not terribly satisfactory.

Fortunately, there are ways around such problems. Let players speak in character as much as they can, but use dice rolls to prompt them as to how well their characters are doing. Various different Attributes and Abilities may be relevant at different times:

- *Wits* can be used for coming up with clever remarks on the spur of the moment, for winning a contest, or for out-thinking a rival.

- *Manipulation* covers knowing when to speak and when to remain silent.

- *Appearance* helps a character get by on sheer beauty.

- *Expression* enables a character to hold the floor in the midst of a party, and to make an impression even if she doesn't know social subtleties.

- *Etiquette* is vital in court; with it, a character knows how (and how not) to behave properly, dress, eat, jest, recognize and address her betters, and make a cutting remark without stepping out of line herself.

Other Traits, like Dancing, Intrigue, Logic and Seduction have their own uses. For specific rolls, see "Intrigue and Social Occasions" in the rulebook, pp. 190-191. For roleplaying prompts, see *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*, p. 110.

Social botches or defeat usually lead to disgrace and ridicule. Failure during direct sabotage (such as spying on an enemy) could be considered actual lawbreaking, while, say, insulting the queen may be interpreted as outright treason. Troupe input can be pretty useful in these situations. If a player makes a good roll, let the other players discuss (*briefly!*) what her character might do. If she botches, suggest that her character has done the worst thing *you* can think of — and perhaps let the other players suggest what might have happened...

"I Am Undone!"

When the social ax falls, the blow can devastate a courtier. In a setting where honor and status are so important, the loss of either (or both!) can literally render a person "dead" in the eyes of her peers. At the higher levels, a vicious rumor or social sin becomes more than an insult. It can cost titles, land, money, friendships, even family ties... especially if the story happens to be true.

In game terms, rumor-mongering (false or otherwise) often involves a plan of attack, followed by a series of "social intrigue" rolls and possibly a bit of roleplaying. Essentially, the gossiping character decides whom to turn against her rival, concocts a good rumor, and spreads it. *Magick's* helpful for this task, especially weaveries like *Chain of Whispers* and *Witness to Atrocity* (see Item, Third). From there, the effects are up to the Storyteller; a good roll, of course, should have a great deal of impact. And, of course, such rumors may be turned *against* players' characters, too.

Social stigma can manifest in game terms, too. Several Flaws — Beholden, Craven Image, Criminal Marks, Enemy, Family Enmity, Infamy and Oathbreaker — focus on disgrace, and a character with a shattered reputation might be given such a Flaw... possibly for good. A treason charge is probably the only way to take away the Merit: *Title*; Backgrounds like *Allies*, *Influence*, *Resources* and *Retinue*, on the other hand, may be reduced temporarily or even permanently by social

disgrace. Depending on the circumstances, the Storyteller might take dots away from the character's Background Trait, and possibly negate Merits like *Letter of Commission*, *Noble Bearing* or *Ties*. In story terms, the necessary people refuse to associate with the character any longer, or they strip away favors, offices and commissions until the character's title is an empty shell.

In time, the character might win her status back, either gradually (as time passes) or suddenly (as a great deed earns new renown). Then again, perhaps the old disgrace is permanent. Such utter ruin can inspire a good character concept, background or secret (see Item, Third), especially for magi with bitter histories or low social skills. Many an adventurer has begun her "career" with a brand, an empty purse, and a heart filled with shame. Unlike many other unfortunates, however, she *refuses* to give in.

"Thank You, Your Grace!"

So why do so many people dare this maze of knives? It's very simple: some are born to it, many crave it, and all would rather die than lose it. Courtly life, with its rarefied beauty, elaborate manners, monetary wealth and social importance, is too rich a jewel to ignore, especially considering the alternatives. Where else can you bow before rulers, gamble with the fate of nations, and run dyed silk between your fingers? Even the lowliest stable-boy stands a little prouder when he shovels shit in the *king's* service!

In story terms, success in court means some degree of fame, fortune, excitement and glamour. And then there are the practical rewards — titles, commissions, wealth, retainers, influence, and the chance to get ahead. Swashbuckling adventures offer magi the chance to rub elbows with kings, romance princes, and protect — or destroy — whole kingdoms. What more could a gamer ask for?

Oh, *that*. Well, in game terms, a character can also earn Merits (*Letter of Commission*, *Natural Linguist*, *Noble Bearing*, *Ties*, *Title*, *True Love*, *Well-Traveled*); Abilities (*Carousing*, *Culture*, *Dancing*, *Etiquette*, *Intrigue*, *Leadership*, *Lore*, *Poisons*, *Politics*, *Secret Code Language*, *Seduction*, *Subterfuge*); or Backgrounds (*Allies*, *Covenant*, *Influence*, *Magickal Treasure*, *Mentor*, *Patron*, *Resources*, *Retinue*, *Sanctum*, *Spies*). At the end of a good session, the Storyteller may decide to award dots in appropriate Traits in lieu of mere experience points. Assuming that the character(s) had some opportunity to earn the new skills or honors, the player and his Storyteller can work out the backstory behind the new Traits and weave them into the chronicle. Over time, a swashbuckling character might grow from an impoverished loner to a wealthy merchant-prince with contacts across the known world.

However, note that while players may be tempted to use their character's Awakened powers to twist courtly minds like taffy, overt magick should probably be reserved for emergencies. Working "witchcraft" at court would surely be considered treason; there are many laws against performing sorcery (in legal terms, "maleficia")

anywhere, let alone in the presence of one's monarch. Rulers tend to be touchy about "miracles," strange gadgets, and other odd happenings, too — and with good reason!

Because of that concern, many rulers and nobles carry assorted charms and protective amulets that supposedly ward off sorcery. While many of these are fraudulent, some are not. In game terms, un-Awakened courtiers, especially powerful ones, might well have a few dice of counter-magick, True Faith, or a "hunch" that warns the courtier of incoming magick, thanks to such defenses. (See that Merit, and "Commonfolk Magics" in the rulebook, plus the Prelude of this book for an example.) Granted, magick is supposed to be a great boon in the corridors of power; even so, hurling fireballs at the sultan is a really bad idea, though — and might not even work at all....

Future Fates: Revolutions of the World

Every time I create an appointment, I create a hundred malcontents and one ingrate.

— King Louis XIV of France (according to Voltaire)

As the Rebirth spreads and kingdoms grow, monarchs and their royal courts become the hubs of powerful nations. Hence, those courts become ever more interesting (if dangerous) places to live and work. International trade and exploration widen the influence of kings, while new technologies and philosophies extend the grasp of mankind from medieval shadows toward the Age of Reason.

Naturally, the Order of Reason loves this development; the Gabrielites see it as a route to their dream of One World, united under God, while Guildsmen insist that large, powerful kingdoms keep the trade-routes safe. The Traditions are less pleased; stronger governments suppress the local power of Hermetic Covenants, and the new, dynamic nations extend their power into lands once dominated by old faiths and tribal cultures. The Council of Nine never really comes together, however. Instead, they fragment and leave the field wide open to Daedalean advances and the new dreams of man. Magick gives way to technology. The future, it seems, belongs to Reason. The Daedaleans give people what they want, and what people seem to want is strong leadership, prosperity and peace.

Er, did we say *peace*? That, sadly, is not in the cards. As Gabrielites watch with mounting horror, France invades Italy and touches off decades of warfare. Then the schism between Catholic and Protestant factions tears bloody, burning holes across the continent — and through the Order of Reason itself. As all-powerful kings send ever-greater armies against one another, explorers (and Enlightened Explorators) bring back

news of new lands to rule. Europe enthusiastically combines wealth from trade with new technology to assert its dominion over the rest of the world.

By the 17th century, it will seem that all-powerful kings are destined to rule the earth. Weak or young monarchs lose their influence to clever, ruthless politicians such as the legendary Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642). The epitome of the trend appears as Louis XIV of France, the "Sun King," who rules from 1643 until 1715, mostly from his astonishing Palace of Versailles. Here, courtly life reaches a climax of formality and grandeur; the nobility dare not stay away from court for fear of being considered rebellious — or worse, unfashionable — so the king keeps everyone under his control. Spain, too, develops a strong monarchy, financed by its New World empire and spearheaded by the powerful Catholic Church. Meanwhile, Italy remains divided into petty kingdoms and city-states. Soon, this cradle of the Renaissance slips into decline. It seems that unity is absolute strength.

However, kings face the occasional challenge. Revolutions, partly inspired by religion and partly by unrest, become commonplace. The English Civil War (1642-1651), for example, sets a would-be absolute king, Charles I, against his own Parliament. Charles, who sympathizes with Catholicism, learns the hard way about the strength of Protestantism among his wealthy subjects. (In short, they defeat and execute him.) Even then, however, monarchy is soon restored. It will be several centuries yet before new forms of government replace monarchs and the nobility.

In the meantime, kings and queens assert their power with style and ruthlessness. The high age of swashbuckling — the 1600s and 1700s — arises from the intrigues of Renaissance courts and flowers like a bloody rose. Even as swashbuckling enters its wildest phase, however, it's already out of fashion across most of Europe. By 1700, the real adventurers go elsewhere: To the Caribbean, where pirates and privateers match wits with colonial sailors. To the Africa and the Americas, where daring Europeans wrest the land from equally determined natives. To Asia, where mysterious kingdoms open like pearls, but bite back like sharks. Back in the "homelands," deadlier firearms and complex diplomacy render sword-swingers obsolete by the 1800s. Just as "magick" fades into the mists of superstition, the dashing courtier becomes a novelty, the hero or villain of storybooks, not a "real" agent of government.

That role, in time, is left to "statesmen," eloquent warriors whose greatest weapons are printing presses, lies and cannons. Political intrigue becomes the domain of politicians who do not dirty their hands with bloodshed. Courtiers now *hire* experts in violence — soldiers, thugs, agents, men in black of all kinds. Eventually, such government spreads across the world. Swashbuckling, it seems, was just a phase. A quaint curiosity. A legend. A myth.

Just like magick.





Item, Second: Masters of the Danse

Therefore, putting on one side imaginary things concerning a prince, and discussing those which are real, I say that all men when they are spoken of, and chiefly princes for being more highly placed, are remarkable for some of those qualities which bring them either blame or praise...

— Niccoló Machiavelli, *The Prince*



All through the evening, Maria had been aware of the emissary's gaze. She knew that her new dress was having the desired effect — a dozen male glances lingered just a moment too long in her direction at one time or another. There was something about the visitor's attentions, though — the three requests for partnership in a dance, the air of distraction — that suggested he was especially susceptible to her charms.

The problem was, she disliked the man and had done nothing to "charm" him at all. Quite the contrary. Maria was generally amused by the flattery inherent in masculine interest; this one, though, had an icy edge to him. The other maids-in-attendance seemed unaware of the man's predatory nature, but Maria practically felt it bristling up her back. Perhaps, she reflected, it was her own animal nature that sensed the threat so acutely. Unfortunately, it was only later, in her chambers, that she truly realized how dangerous the emissary was.

Maria had her back to the curtains when the emissary entered. She heard him slip over the windowsill, but had no time to turn around. In a moment, his right arm went around her throat and yanked her backwards. Even as she struggled to ram her elbow into his chest, his left hand grappled with her nightshift. She slammed him hard in the ribcage, and he faltered. For a moment, his grip loosened. Then he spun her around and his hard fist pounded into her belly.

By the time Maria could open her eyes and focus through clouds of tears and pain, he was on top of her. His dagger was out and her shift was in tatters.

She tried to reach for his own eyes, but her fingers would not respond. Damn!

Then the emissary grunted and rolled up and away. Drawing in a quick, heavy breath that filled her eyes with tears again, Maria scrambled for one of the knives she kept nearby. Any moment, she feared, he'd crush her down again....

But the emissary was on his feet in a slight fighter's crouch. Now he'd drawn another weapon, and faced away from Maria. Beyond him stood Gareth, his sword out, the blade up and forward. With a blank, almost bored expression, Gareth deflected the emissary's sword and dagger with quick left-and-right parries. Despite his bluster, Maria noted, her attacker was a rapist, not a duelist. The chancellor's bodyguard clearly had all possible advantages over his opponent. Why didn't Gareth simply run the man through?

Because, thought Maria as her fingers closed around a knife-hilt, he wants something. He's waiting.

Indeed, Gareth was letting himself be pushed back toward the wall. In a moment more, his sword locked hilts with the emissary's blade. The emissary, baring his teeth like a beast, drew back his dagger for a thrust that could only be blocked by Gareth's gauntleted wrist — if at all.

To hell with his waiting! Maria raked the knife across the emissary's ribs, whispering a faint invocation to Macha as she did so.

Of Adepts at Court

Wounded, the man gasped, turned back upon the witch....
...and Gareth threw a punch with his sword-hand. His basket hilt broke the emissary's jaw with a gritty crunch. The emissary groaned, then dropped, unconscious.

Gareth lowered his sword-point and looked down at his defeated opponent. "The thing about the Fallen," he observed with a forced casualness, "is that they are, obviously, susceptible to temptation and distraction. Not that one should rely on...."

"Bastard!" Maria lunged in and lashed her knife across the bodyguard's chest. Gareth's eyes flickered with surprise as he snapped back — not fast enough. Only his brigandine breastplate saved him from her thrust. Then his sword whipped up and around, striking her knife aside. With both blades out of line, they stared into each other's eyes.

"Bastard!" she snarled again. "I'll not play the whore for you and that... lizard... you serve. If you wanted this one dead, you could bait your traps without me. I'm not one of your killers."

"Dead? No, we're not that merciful." Gareth lowered his blade again carefully, and nodded at Maria's blade, indicating she should do the same. "We have brave new amusements waiting for him when he awakens."

For a moment, she thought of burying her dagger in the emissary's throat, neatly combining vengeance, mercy and spite into one. But then she took in a deep breath (which sent new spirals of pain through her stomach), and lowered her knife-hand to one side.

Meanwhile, Gareth picked up the dress — the dangerous dress, she now understood — from where it lay draped atop a chest, and he tossed it to her. She suddenly realized that her torn shift had left her as good as naked. Grimacing, Maria held the dress across her breasts and glared at the chancellor's man, feeling the soft but unmistakable shudder of magick in its broken threads.

"Mind you," Gareth continued, sheathing his sword, "I doubt that anything we'll do to that one will be half as bad as he'll suffer after death." For a moment, he cocked one ear, as if to hear anyone else who might be coming. There was no one, so he knelt down to pick the emissary up. "And don't worry," Gareth added, draping the other man across his shoulders, "I've not forgotten that you're already somebody else's killer."

"Quite a trick," Maria said dryly, "weaving spellcraft into the dress." She locked eyes with Gareth, who was moving toward the open window. Despite her anger and the ache in her belly, she smiled slightly. "I'll admit," she said, "that's a trick I'd like to learn."

Gareth smiled in response. Maria had that sort of effect on people. "Perhaps," he replied, "there are things we can both teach one another."

"Later," Maria added.

"Later," he agreed.

Men in great place are thrice servants: servants of the sovereign or state; servants of fame; and servants of business.

— Francis Bacon, *Essays: Of Great Place*

Linguistically, "court" has several meanings. In its original Latin form *cohors*, it applies both to enclosed areas and protective fellowships. As a verb, it essentially means "to woo" or "to flatter," and in the royal sense it refers to the meeting-places and associations of powerful folk. A courtier magus understands the court in every sense; within its powerful, often protected confines, he flatters and woos his fellows, sometimes with magick, often with fine words and favors. Thus, a sorcerer or Daedalean who calls any court "home" belongs to a special breed. He understands the rules that govern this "enclosure," works within them, and uses them to his advantage.

Although some latter-day swashbucklers will prefer the courts of the high seas (which have their own rough codes and honors), a magus who plies his or her trade in Renaissance courts favors politesse over raw power. Whether he's a servant, guest, guard or ruler, he understands the importance of social graces... and rules. When such courtiers do their work, they prize style and subtlety. Let rural witches cackle over their cauldrons! The urban magus has more refined methods in mind.

An Awkward Truce

Politics, it will be said in future centuries, makes for strange bedfellows. Enlightened politicians of the era of the **Sorcerers Crusade** era would understand the sentiment perfectly. As the main rulebook points out, the budding Ascension War often spills out into courts and counting-houses. Still, these struggles rarely escalate into all-out warfare. Any shrewd courtier knows that an enemy turned is better than an enemy slain, and many Tradition magi and Daedaleans recognize potential allies even when the "allies" in question are on a different "side." Metaphors aside, politics is not a battlefield — the enemies are not divided into clearly marked armies, and individual truces are possible. Every courtier has his or her agendas, and when those agendas meet, bargains can be made. Thus, mysticks, Daedaleans, independent sorcerers, and even the occasional Infernalist make bargains, pacts, compromises and alliances with one another — and to hell with orthodoxy!

Such alliances take many forms: Hermetic court wizards protect visiting Explorators in return for knowledge; Ksirafai agents manipulate witches to test the loyalty of other Daedaleans; Solificati trade alchemical secrets with High Guildsmen, and everyone tries to gain the support of mundane but useful lords and clergymen.

Any mystick or Daedalean society can have agents in a mortal court, and most sects contend within the massive courts of magick that occupy Horizon, Doissetep and the two White Towers (see Appendix II). By rights, *any* magus could find a post in or around a palace or manor house: A witch could tell fortunes, sell charms, protect an ancestral ally, or assault an old enemy. An artisan or artist could find patronage amid the courtiers and sovereigns. Clerical folk are always welcome in court (well, *almost* always) — they serve as confessors, scribes, diplomats and tutors. And some rulers like to keep a “pet wizard” or two in the background, just in case of trouble.

Despite — or perhaps because of — these strange “undercourts,” three Awakened societies dominate the palaces and marketplaces of Renaissance Europe:

- The High Guild, which was formed specifically to deal in trade and diplomacy, and in many ways guides the changes that mark the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era.
- The Hermetic and Solificati Traditions, whose allies, studies and political influence make the combined sect a force to be reckoned with.
- And the Ksirafai, secret “enforcer” arm of the Daedalean Order, whose penchants for disguise, information, power brokering and seduction make its agents perfect courtiers in the Machiavelli mode.

Considering their apparent antagonism, these groups mix pretty well in the ebb and flow of courtly affairs. Most Crown’d Ones are noble by birth and rich by inclination, and despite their solitude, these Solificati enjoy the privileges of court. The Hermetics, of course, are past masters of intrigue and influence; the Houses of Jerbiton, Mercere, Quaesitor and Tyalus have old connections to royal families, and boast enough riches to partner them with many merchants and craftsmen, besides. Compared to these wizards, the Guildsmen and Razors might seem like newcomers at court. That impression, however, would be wrong.

Lords of Deception

Like any courtier, these magi have their rivalries. Yet all three factions share a common approach to power, and a similar respect for the rules. But rules, as we know, are made to be broken. Thus, two other factions threaten the common good:

- Infernalists love to infiltrate and corrupt courts, for obvious reasons, and they usually find it very easy to do so — after all, power and decadence breed fearsome appetites. It’s been said that a Hell-born threat is the only thing that can make mysticks and Daedaleans cooperate, but that’s not always true. Sometimes those factions strike pacts that have nothing to do with the Fallen; and occasionally, despite alliances made to stop them, the diabolists win.

Infernalists, you see, are skilled tempters. Many a Nephandus has turned his enemies against one another then watched the bonfires from a safe distance. When the smoke clears, the Fallen One and his cohorts strike deals with the survivors, buying a new place of influence on the graves of his opponents. Besides, a clever Infernalist doesn’t need to soil his own hands at all. Courts are breeding-grounds for greedy mortals who mortgage their souls to Fallen magi, and those magi know how to turn the court against potential threats. Witch-hunters are such useful tools sometimes, and lords are even better....

- And then there are the various vampire clans, with their immortal powers and vast political experience. Unfortunately, although most Enlightened Ones realize that such beings exist, few wizards recognize the danger a vampire presents.

Common “wisdom” claims the former lords of night are in retreat, banished by the sun of man’s “Rebirth.” Sadly, most wizards underestimate the bonds of blood that unite vampire society. As the so-called Camarilla comes together (soon followed by the even more demonic Sabbat), the former dark lords transform themselves into puppet-masters. Consolidating their power, the clans worm their way into courts across Europe and the Middle East. Most magi, Daedaleans included, remain blind to these incursions. And so, for now, vampires seem like charming anachronisms — not serious rivals, but mere curiosities. Time will show how wrong this perception is....

The wheel spins and the courtiers dance — some with sharp blades, others with cruel words and promises. And within this ballet of knives, a handful of magickal and Daedalean sects understand the steps between than most of their rivals do. And so they should — for some of them have invented the dance itself.

Golden Rules: The High Guild

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings — nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And — which is more — you’ll be a Man, my son!
— Rudyard Kipling, If—*

In later days, it will be said that he who has the gold makes the rules. Yet in the Dark Ages, commerce was considered a necessary evil. True, the feudal lords protected (and exploited) their peasants in exchange for food and

services, but this system of "divine right" left a lot of common tradesmen out in the cold. Despite the obvious need for their skills and goods, these tradesmen were often no better off than the serfs in their fields. (Frequently, in fact, they were *worse* off.) And so, at the Gathering of the Square in 997, merchants and tradesmen from across Europe, exchanged grievances, and laid the foundations for a High Guild that would serve as lord, companion and vassal to them all.

The Renaissance High Guild bears little resemblance to that small, embittered gathering. Over the past few centuries it has expanded, broken off from its Craftmason forefathers, and established a network of halls and trade routes spanning the known world. In the process, it has actually aided the spread of culture, commerce and diplomacy among mortals and magi alike. For as the Guildsmen soon recognized, trade cannot survive long in a circle of bared swords. And so, the Golden Convention has encouraged old foes to work together, crossed ancestral barriers in search of new compromises, and purchased favors and influence with a combination of ingenuity, ruthlessness and *Ars Cupiditae*. Now, as the Guild's tree begins to bear fruit, these Daedaleans dominate the European courts.

The High Guild is usually thought of as the mercantile arm of the Order of Reason. It is that, true enough, but it's also more. The Guild's riches, combined with its emphasis on self-perfection, produce the most sophisticated magi the world has ever seen. Guildsmen (and women) may not have the aristocratic breeding of the Celestial Masters, the religious pedigree of the Gabrielites, or the spectacular innovations of the Artificers and Cosians. But they do have the manners and the money... and a host of innovations of their own.

Methods

It's often said that a Guildsmen would rather buy an enemy's heart than chop off his head. That adage — and the truth behind it — make members of the Golden Convention seem rather shifty compared to their forthright companions. In most cases, a Guildsman will exchange favors and coins with a so-called "adversary." True, he'll "season" the exchange with a bit of Enlightened influence (and probably wreck his foe's reputation in the bargain), but as any tradesman will tell you, excessive bloodshed is wasteful, especially if you're trying to raise humanity above its present barbarism.

And the Guild, as a whole, is interested in progress. The gold this Convention is named for reflects both material riches and the greater enrichment of the soul. A man who wallows in mud can be expected to act piggish; in contrast, one who dines with kings might become kingly himself. This logic defines the ideal that drives the Guild's machinations: to raise all men (and sometimes even women!)

to nobility in word, deed and Enlightenment. Thus, violence should be avoided whenever possible. At those times when force is required, the old "eggs and omelets" adage applies (even if omelets have yet to be invented). Gold must be mined, of course, and dirt must be chipped away so that the gold might be claimed, shaped and polished. Even then, however, most Guildsmen favor subtlety over might. The slender swords and masterful fencing techniques they employ epitomize the Convention's approach. Why use a hammer when you can get better results with a knife?

The Inner Guilds

Like fencing blades, the "knives" in question take several different forms. These sub-guilds each specialize in certain techniques and arenas:

The Resplendent Axe Guild

A merchant caravan requires an armed escort. By that same wisdom, the courtiers and tradesmen within the High Guild employ guards and enforcers who specialize in violence. Unlike mere thugs, these Resplendent Axes are courtiers in their own right, magically Enlightened and socially refined. While other Guildsmen prefer wit and promises, however, the Axes master Arts and tools of war — armor, weapons, firearms, specialized gadgets, and charms that can break a person's will (or bones) with little trouble.

Resplendent Axes are recruited for their size, strength, ruthlessness and courage. Nearly all of them are men, although a handful of women work as "covert agents" specializing in poison and assassination. A typical Axe speaks little — his deeds do the talking; when he does speak, however, he displays the same social acumen that his fellow Guildsmen employ. Despite appearances, an Axe is not stupid, though he might act that way as misdirection. In most cases, he works as an agent under the command of another Guild, protecting and implementing the interests of his weaker "employers." Thus, an Axe travels around, often changing "assignments" when need be. For his efforts, he's well-paid; although he contributes a share of his payment to the Axe Guild itself, this Daedean makes enough money to live quite comfortably — provided, of course, that he's good at his job.

Loyal, yet frighteningly remote, a Resplendent Axe does whatever it takes to safeguard his employer. Combat, intimidation, torture, and frequently monotonous waiting all come with the territory. In time, old Axes either retire altogether, or become House Masters or instructors at various High Guild lodges. Such comfort, sadly, is denied to most Axe Guildsmen; this profession has a very high mortality rate, and the Axe who lives to retire is a lucky man indeed.

The "Black Uncles" (Patron's Guild)

Wealthy, influential and very, very smart, the Patrons avoid open combat but relish the social challenges of court and marketplace. While other Guildsmen bicker or trade, the "Black Uncles" find worthy artists, craftsmen, agents and clients, then shower those fortunate few with riches and power... so long as the beneficiary does what the Patron wants him to do, of course. To that end, these Daedaleans specialize in the Arts of Fortune and Charm, leaving the dirty work to Axes and Rose Guildsmen.

While most "Black Uncles" come from noble families, some were born to common but wealthy merchants. Typically, an "Uncle" is an older man whose financial and social proficiency has already bought him considerable influence. In many cases, a Patron begins in another group but joins this Inner Guild after his efforts have won him a fortune. Slowing down, he selects a handful of promising clients and successors, then uses his money and power to buy them new opportunities. Every so often, an "Uncle" might get involved in a plot or rivalry; for the most part, though, these Guildsmen have had enough excitement for one lifetime, and prefer to *sponsor* intrigues instead.

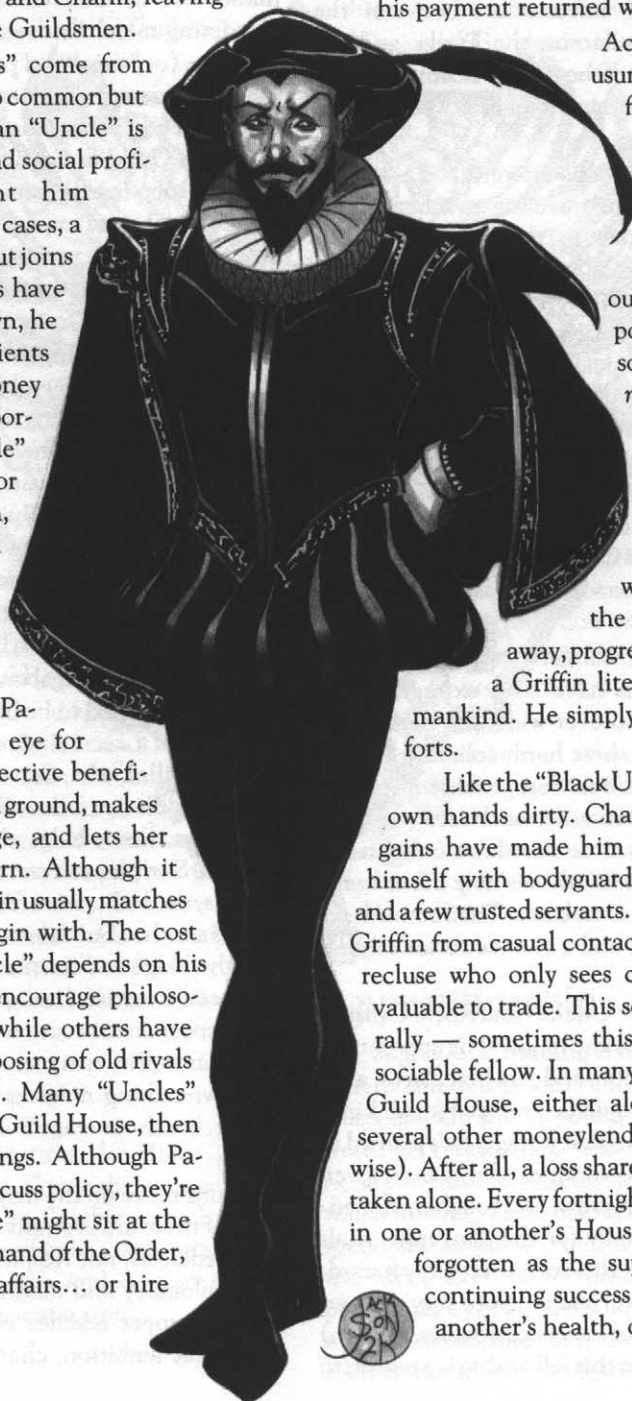
The archetypal "angel" to artists, courtiers and scholars, a Patron has keen instincts and an eye for potential. Approaching a prospective beneficiary, he describes some common ground, makes the client an offer of patronage, and lets her know what he expects in return. Although it sounds rather Faustian, this bargain usually matches the beneficiary's interests to begin with. The cost of doing business with an "Uncle" depends on his agenda; some simply want to encourage philosophy, science and innovation, while others have more sinister purposes (like disposing of old rivals or ruining some competition). Many "Uncles" assume the Magistrate post in a Guild House, then dictate policy for their underlings. Although Patrons gather every so often to discuss policy, they're an independent lot. An "Uncle" might sit at the right hand of a king and the left hand of the Order, but he prefers to tend his own affairs... or hire others to do it for him.

The Royal Griffin Guild

Like the mighty creatures for whom they're named, the Royal Griffins are regal, hungry and powerful. While the "Black Uncles" sponsor artists and agents, the Griffins lend money to sovereigns, banking houses, and large trading companies (including other Guilds). These folk (often men, but occasionally women) number among the richest of the rich. Many a king wishes he had a Griffin's coffers at his disposal! For a price, that ruler can have all the wealth he needs. The catch, of course, is that the Griffin will want his payment returned with interest.

According to the Church, such usury is a sin. Consequently, Griffins don't tend to be overly concerned with spiritual virtues. A typical Royal Griffin is pragmatic, astute, and opportunistic. Unlike a Patron, he won't simply lend out his hard-earned money for potential returns — he wants something tangible, and right *now*, thank you. When folk speak of cold-hearted Guildsmen, they usually have these bankers in mind. Yet for all his apparent callousness, a Griffin has a higher purpose: without his largesse, without the money that he so freely lends away, progress is limited to a crawl. Hence, a Griffin literally buys a better future for mankind. He simply wants something for his efforts.

Like the "Black Uncles," a Griffin rarely gets his own hands dirty. Chances are, his riches and bargains have made him paranoid, and he surrounds himself with bodyguards (often Resplendent Axes) and a few trusted servants. These underlings insulate the Griffin from casual contact; odds are good he's an utter recluse who only sees clients who have something valuable to trade. This solitude is not universal, naturally — sometimes this Grand Financier is a rather sociable fellow. In many cases, a Griffin heads a local Guild House, either alone or in cooperation with several other moneylenders (Enlightened and otherwise). After all, a loss shared is less punishing than a loss taken alone. Every fortnight, the local Griffins all gather in one or another's House, and old trade disputes are forgotten as the super-rich raise a toast to the continuing success of their Order... and to one another's health, of course.



The Albatross Guild

Commerce does not stand still. In fact, the stagnation of the Dark and Middle Ages can be partly blamed on the narrow bounds of trade and the hazards of long voyages. Now that the world is opening up, merchants travel on long-abandoned paths, or blaze new ones to fresh marketplaces. Someone, of course, has to make those perilous journeys — and reap the profits from the risk. The Albatross Guild (and its counterparts across Asia and Upper Africa) takes such risks in stride. In the process, its members serve as couriers, diplomats and ambassadors between the Daedalean lodges, the Dalou'laoshi, the Dyula, and the *caravanerai* (caravan-shelters) of the Arabian Camel's Guild. Few human beings, magus or otherwise, are as well traveled as a brother of the Albatross.

Naturally, the albatross is not a universal "mascot" for this Guild. In Arabia, where the traveling merchants have their largest non-Christian domains, the Guild is known as the House of Camels or the Falcon Brotherhood. In Mali, the Dyula symbol is the ox, and its tenders are known as Ox Brothers. Amusingly enough, Chinese Guildsmen favor the cricket and the bat — auspicious animals with diabolical connotations in Europe. To further the confusion, Chinese Guildsmen often refer to themselves as *fu qian cheng* — often mistranslated from "those who devoutly serve Fortune/hard work," into "those who piously worship bats." This association has caused many problems over the years, but the Guild Houses of China refuse to change their auspicious symbols just because some unwashed barbarians tell them to.

Despite the occasional misunderstandings, the Albatrosses and their counterparts have been extraordinarily successful. Working within an ever-widening network of caravans and shipping lanes, these hardy folk move goods all over the mapped world. When Europe "discovers" the Americas, the Albatrosses journey across the sea and carry back unimaginable riches. In close coordination with the Explorators, these Guildsmen forsake a stable life at home for the chance to prosper in distant lands. Their rewards are threefold: money, adventure, and a chance to see all that mankind has to offer.

In sharp contrast to "Black Uncles" and Royal Griffins, the Albatross is an adventuresome fellow. His apprenticeship includes both *Ars Cupiditae* and *Ars Praeclarus*; after all, a wandering tradesman should be prepared for all kinds of crises. Before he leaves on his first voyage, he's trained in several different languages and varieties of etiquette, given basic seamanship and riding lessons, and toughened mentally, physically and emotionally for the dangerous trials ahead. Long-distance travel in this era is incredibly hazardous; an Albatross must be clever *and* tough to survive even a year in his Guild. The man (or very occasionally, woman) who manages to prosper within this fellowship is a person to

be reckoned with. Should he (or she) settle down, an Albatross often becomes master of a large, wealthy trading-house, or retires to a secluded villa decorated with trophies of his travels. Even if he retires, however, the Albatross remains in demand. Such a well-traveled soul is considered a boon to any court or council, and he may be asked to work as an advisor long after his travels are done.

The Sun Guild

Like the Albatross Guild, the Sun Guild plays a diplomatic role in Convention affairs. However, while the wandering merchants seek new marketplaces and wealth, the Suns (or "vagabond princes") concentrate on communication, coordination and diplomacy. These folk (men and women in fairly equal numbers) serve as seneschals for the High Guild as a whole. Some manage funds and accounts; others inscribe and compile information; a privileged few formulate and implement plans for the Guild; and still others smooth the way for those plans, bargaining, bribing, seducing and undermining all resistance to the Convention's trade.

As swashbuckling goes, this Inner Guild is fairly mundane. Most of its members spend more time balancing books than sharpening steel. Even so, the "vagabonds" know an eerie amount about court secrets, and can be counted on to exploit any vice or weakness an opponent has. To these clever Guildsmen, the greater progress of mankind is worth a few lost reputations and poisoned goblets. After all, anyone who would interfere with the advance trade is blocking the advance of humanity. And *that* would not do at all!

The average "vagabond prince" is a planner, not a doer. When hands need to be bloodied, she calls in a Rose or an Axe. From a secure stronghold (often a keep or well-guarded villa), the Sun reviews information, meets in councils with her fellow Guildsmen, and plots her lodge's next move. Since lodge plans (and merchants) often conflict, the Sun plays an eternal game of Chess; the pawns are mortals, the bishops are fellow Guildsmen, the knights and rooks are other Daedaleans, and the king and queen represent the lodge and its interests. Given her close proximity to mortal courtiers, vampires and rival magi, the "vagabond" specializes in various kinds of Lore (as the Knowledge Trait), as well as intrigue, etiquette, politics, and an array of mind-wrenching magicks. She might not be much of a fighter, but the average Sun Guildsman rarely *needs* to fight openly.

Suns make up the majority of any Guild House's staff. Most of them are low ranking functionaries — apprentices and Mediators, not Resplendents — schooled in accounting, diplomacy and manners. Those who manage to rise into the upper reaches of Guild hierarchy demonstrate formidable ambition, charm and imagination. These folk

become the Magistrates of their Houses, and leaders within the Daedalean Order.

The Rose Guild

Literal agents of Fortune, these charismatic swash-bucklers embody the Convention's rapier approach. Fast and graceful, they take up position and present a charming image. Just as quickly, they move in, cut an enemy's legs out from under him, or pierce his heart with a sudden thrust. The Axes might specialize in carnage, but the Roses prefer finesse. When an obstacle needs to be converted, seduced, intimidated or quietly disposed of, the Rose Guild is ready to act.

While many Guildsmen are merchants first and Daedaleans second, a Rose is a true master of *Ars Cupiditae*. Each one, male or female, knows fencing techniques, languages, social gamesmanship, helpful skills (like horsemanship, disguise and stealth), and forbidden gambits like poison and sexuality. Nearly all of them are uncommonly attractive, intelligent and polite. Luck seems to favor a Rose in whatever she does, as well it might; her training includes the Arts of Fortune as well as charm and force.

A swashbuckler in the classic sense, the Rose agent is a freelance "employee" of the High Guild. She goes wherever she is needed and does whatever needs to be done. Unlike an Axe, she usually favors persuasion over violence. If violence is required, however, she often carries an array of blades, special gadgets and dirty tricks. Chances are, she'll die before she retires — her kind often does. If she does survive to Mastery, though, she'll probably take her place in the upper ranks of the High Guild.

Like her namesake, a Rose Guild agent tends to have a bright, idealistic disposition. Stylish and fearless, she seems to enjoy the means more than the end. Although some Roses study the esoteric refinements of *Ars Cupiditae*, many prefer adventure to mysticism. Often common-born, our Rose would appreciate Machiavelli's sentiment: "For it may be said of men in general that they are... anxious to avoid danger and covetous of gain; as long as you benefit them, they are entirely yours." A member of the Rose Guild knows how to play both benefit and danger to her best advantage.

Membership

Like any Daedalean Convention, the High Guild is very particular about its members. Given the unusual trades they pursue, Guildsmen must be flexible and clever — Enlightenment alone will not suffice! — and progressive enough to challenge both Church and custom as they purchase a better world one piece at a time.

Entry into the Guild

Although a fair number of Guildsmen come from noble families with many Enlightened members (including certain successful trading-houses), the "gift" is not reliably inherited. Hence, the Guild is always looking for talent outside its organization. Nonetheless, *Ars Cupiditae* demands a specific intuition about the nature of things — most especially about the power of money, desire and trade. In a world that often considers the merchant a better class of thief, such broad-minded understanding comes easier, perhaps, to commoners brought up to trade.

Potential Guildsmen are watched with close but cautious interest. A person with the courage and ambition to approach a prosperous merchant and request apprenticeship is given a cursory once-over; similarly, a courtier with unusual charisma or acuity may be added to the Guild's list, even if she happens to be a servant or newcomer. For a while, the prospective member is observed, tested from a distance, and challenged with many social and philosophical obstacles. If she manages to come out ahead, a Guild sponsor (in game terms, a Mentor or Patron) will strike up a relationship with the candidate. If she seems ambitious, ruthless and insightful enough, she may be apprenticed into the group. If not, she's misled, recruited into the mundane ranks, or disposed of.

Note that Guildsmen are expected to be adept at mundane social skills before they begin their Enlightened training; *Ars Cupiditae* is too dangerous and uncertain to be a substitute for good manners and sharp wits. Some elements of the Guild don't require *too* much in the way of courtly graces, but even Resplendent Axe bodyguards are expected to understand the circles in which they must move.

The combination of worldly skills and Enlightened disciplines make most Guildsmen a bit too proud; they're few, powerful and sophisticated, and they *know* it. On the other hand, a humble or cowardly merchant doesn't last long in his profession. Thus, even the un-Enlightened members of this sect can drive a hard bargain, or play a dangerous trick.

Apprenticeship

High Guild training is notoriously exciting; the life of a merchant in this age is full of risks, and those who cannot adapt quickly are not suited for membership. It's also hard work; apprentices are seen as precisely that, and traders need porters to fetch and carry, teamsters to keep baggage-trains moving, and book-keepers to track every coin they spend and acquire. (And, in keeping with the attitude of the times, even minor misbehavior can lead to physical punishment.) Still, the Guild is concerned with wealth and social position, and every member must learn to appreciate such things from the beginning of their training onward.

Hence, apprentices spend much of their time in a fair amount of comfort, with good food, good lodgings, and the chance to make interesting acquaintances. These "gifts" are not free, though. An apprentice must prove she's worthy, or she's out on the street in no time.

The apprentice must take risks, too — voluntarily and on her own initiative. Experienced Guildsmen are always ready to teach their students something new, but a student must *seek* the learning. If a pupil overreaches herself, she may have to be slapped down; a decent master, however, will make it clear that the punishment is being administered not for daring to *do* something, but for not *succeeding*. It's not quite fair to say (as some other Daedaleans do) that a High Guild apprentice must display adequate greed before she can advance, but she will have to show that she's got the drive and ambition that defines a Grand Financier.

The Organization

Compared to the ritualistic Craftmasons or disciplined Gabrielites, the High Guild is a loose organization. Its Guild Houses (lodges) tend to be trading houses or mercantile brotherhoods based out of inns, shops or townhomes. Each one of these maintains a particular business in the area, although "high halls" in major cities dabble a bit in most of the local commerce. Some "lodges" are actually mobile — ships, caravans, or courts "on progress." At any time, many of a given lodge's members may be out on the road, leaving the Guild House itself in the hands of one or two senior members and a large clutch of functionaries — low-ranking Brethren who act as accountants and housekeepers. While House loyalty is expected and valued, few members are actually forbidden to change lodges, so long as no oaths or secrets are betrayed. If and when a Guildsman does decide to change lodges, he often discusses the matter with the Magistrate first. Even so, some members leave (or are "excused") with little more than a courteous resignation note.

And yes, conflicts between lodges do happen, and are officially tolerated. (This is hardly exceptional among the Awakened; Hermetic Covenants have been fighting petty wars for centuries.) Generally, though, one-upmanship — not slaughter — provides the swords in a Guild dispute. Grand Financiers usually settle their differences with vicious but bloodless contests of trade, negotiation and political influence. Only occasionally are blades drawn, and then the problem is usually settled by a formal duel, not a brawl. Physical violence between Guildsmen usually draws investigation and censure from senior members and Magistrates. (Strange "accidents," however, are often considered occupational hazards unless they utterly stink of murder.) In severe disputes, Magistrates intervene and mediate the matter. Such mediation can only be enforced at the highest levels, but all Guildsmen are at least *supposed* to honor the peacemaker's vocation.

If the Guild needs to enforce discipline, punishments usually take the form of huge fines; after all, Guildsmen are supposed to be good at acquiring money, so anything less would hardly be effective. Physical injury is considered crude — if nothing else, it diminishes a Guildsman's all-important ability to make a profit for the Order. In very rare cases, a scandal or crime might force the Magistrate to impose death or exile. In this case, the offender is usually turned over to the local authorities on charges (real or invented) of treason or swindling — after subtle measures have been taken to prevent the criminal from using Enlightened Arts to escape.

Philosophy

Unlike their medieval companions and primitive rivals, Guildsmen tend to be fiercely humanistic. Generally, they don't try to comprehend the world, then locate human beings within that world — quite the opposite. Like the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras, most Guild members insist that "man is the measure of all things"; hence, all things must be measured by what they do for (or with) humanity.

The High Guild's overall humanistic (and optimistic) philosophy contrasts sharply with the ideals held by the group's founders, the Craftmasons. To the older Convention, Creation is a great building — a temple within which each honest laborer may toil and build. Guildsmen, however, feel that the Craftmasons have too narrow a focus — each Mason labors over his own small part of the structure, and all too often disregards the rest of it. The Golden Convention looks outward, toward trade, travel, knowledge and diplomacy — skills that furnish the Order with a greater array of tools. If the world is God's building, a Guildsman might say, it is less a static cathedral than a bustling measure house.

To a Guildsman, the world is a *wondrous* place, a web of relationships and communications. And it is the human capacity for understanding that gives it meaning. His grasp of trade, of the intricacies of value and exchange, grants him a deeper understanding of the relationships that bind Creation. To the *Floreatus* ("Blossoming One"), other Awakened folk are solipsists; the wizard in his tower, the witch-coven in the woods, even, frankly, the Artificer in his forge, all cut themselves off from the wider world. (Guildsmen who know anything about Batini lore have a great deal of respect for parts of the "Doctrine of Unity," if not for all of it.) By sequestering themselves, these so-called "Enlightened Ones" blind themselves instead. Our Guildsman can understand and even respect religious ideals of human unity under Divine authority; at heart, though, he probably feels such ideals are unrealistic. Trade is a more reliable, immediate and equable than a rigid Divine hierarchy; better still, it provides a sense of value and a road to

self-improvement. Even brothers need to eat, after all. Why not allow one brother to gather more food, and perhaps even sell it to his siblings, if the gathering and the selling will make him a better man?

Other folk consider our Floreatus a miser, but while he might be vulnerable to wealth's temptations, he doesn't tend to hoard it like some kind of dragon. By the Guild's philosophy, material things are to be held, understood and *evaluated*; to hoard them is to deny them — and yourself — a place in the world. Riches might prove a man's skill and inspiration, of course, but as Christ said, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works." Gold, of course, is a material symbol of goodness and purity, but in the end it's only a symbol. It merely reflects the value of he who gathers it. So while any good Floreatus lets that gold shine in the sun, he's usually careful not to suffer King Midas' fate.

"Magick": The Art of Gold

The richest gold of all, of course, is metaphysical not material. Although each Guild House contains many un-Enlightened Brethren and Sisters as servants and employees, a true Floreatus is capable of all sorts of minor miracles.

Even so, Guildsmen, like most Daedaleans, disdain the term "magick"; *Ars Cupiditae*, after all, is a rational and systematic Art, not superstitious puffery! True, many Guildsmen practice alchemy, but in this day and age alchemy is considered an artful science, not "magick." An Enlightened Floreatus achieves her mastery of self and others through hard work and advanced philosophies, and she'd be mortally offended by the suggestion that she was some kind of witch. (See Item, Third for further details of this Art of Desire.)

Daemons

As for the Daemon and its odd instructions, that "spirit" is simply a personification of the Floreatus' own inner genius. Was not Socrates himself haunted by his Daemon? Thanks to their taste for classical philosophy and its associated myths, Guildsmen (and other students of *Ars Cupiditae*) have less difficulty with the concept of the personal Daemon than many other Daedaleans do. It's not heresy or devil worship, merely a product of one's imagination — or, at worst, a guide from God that allows the Guildsman to achieve his true potential.

Such "entities" take many different forms. Most, though, appear somewhat human — as ghosts or the more approachable kind of angel. Some Guildsmen, having delved into classical lore, are visited by the divinities of the Greek or Roman world (the Goddess Fortuna seems especially pleased with members of the Golden Convention). Good Christian Guildsmen theorize that such "deities" are in fact an order of spirit-beings below the angels, perhaps

dangerously subject to the sin of pride, but charged by God to *aid* humanity, not to destroy it.

(True, there are those *Floreati* who seem to converse with Mammon or other demons. Those folk *never* speak of their guiding spirits, however, and often fear them rather than worship them... unless, of course, the Guildsman actually *does* fall into Infernalism, in which case all bets are off.)

Seekings

Archetypally, a Guildsman facing his or her Daemon stands up, folds his arms, and conducts a rational discussion with it. To a beginner, the Seeking seems like a bargaining session; as he grows older and wiser, though, the Guildsman realizes that (contrary to rumor), not *everything* can be bought and sold. To advance in Enlightenment, a true Floreatus must perfect himself, not ask another entity to do it for him.

Generally, the Seeking is a very intellectual, if dramatic, test or confrontation: In the halls of his memory palace (see Item, Third), the Guildsman faces some obstacle or temptation, and triumphs by taking the proverbial "road less traveled" — the unusual path, not the obvious one. More often than not, this test occurs in a man-made dwelling, not a wilderness. The High Guild is, after all, a humanistic Convention, and a Floreatus must transcend his base, animal nature, not embrace it — though he must also come to comprehend that part of himself.

Quintessence and Tass

As for the stuff of which Creation is made, philosophy gives way to alchemy. Naturally, different texts and teachers offer various explanations: it's an alchemical First Principle, it's the stuff of which Platonic Forms are made, it's the Will of God made manifest, the purest form of True Gold, etc., etc., etc. What matters most is that it *works*. That much, at least, any Guildsman can understand.

In its most useful form, the *Quinte Essence* coalesces into Tass, a useful bit of distilled Creation. In its most recognizable aspects (to a Floreatus, anyway), Tass often appears as incredibly valuable matter — liquid gold, heavy coins, fine silk, Abundanti's Oil, bright gems, and so forth. "Dark" Tass, like that distilled from a corrupted or malignant Cray, usually manifests as virulent poison, tar, flawed gold or blood. (Literal "blood money" can and does exist in a Guildsman's world.) Naturally, this Tass can be quantified, and thus bought and sold. At that point, fancy explanations don't really matter. Trade is trade, and Tass is *quite* valuable....

The Shadow World

Ultimately, the High Guild belongs to the Order of Reason, and defines its formal alliances and enmities on

that basis. In many ways, this Convention defines the Order's ideals, its methods, and ultimately its downfall. Essentially, the High Guild stands as court champion for the Daedaleans. Although each member has his or her own dislikes and favorites, the Order's friends are a Guildsman's friends, and its enemies, his own.

Daedaleans...

Inside the Order, things can be a bit contentious at times. Despite the ties between the Crafters and the Guildsmen, dark clouds have shadowed their friendship. The sturdy old Crafters (and their fiery young hotheads) seem too concerned about the plight of the common man; if a person is so valuable, a Guildsman might argue, why can't she elevate *herself*? In a similar vein, the fanatical Gabrielites often cross words (and sometimes swords) with their High Guild allies over matters of faith; the courtiers seem too worldly for their own good, and the Knights appear ready to burn the world to ashes if God so commands!

The other Conventions, however, make grand allies. Artisans and Explorators share many of the Guild's ambitions; in return for a little extra consideration or patronage, a tinker or sailor might bend over backwards to please a wealthy sponsor! The old "Celestial" coots in their towers seem too nosy for some courtiers' tastes, but they're often rich enough to make the trouble worthwhile. The physicians in their frightening labs seem a bit ominous to many a swashbuckler, but a Cosian still makes a good friend when you've got poison in your belly or steel in your back! As for backstabbing, well, most Guildsmen would understand the Machiavellian need for secretive "Razors"; just the same, the thought of these fabled bogeymen makes perceptive Floreati *very* uneasy....

...And the Damned

Outside the Order, on the other hand, wait dangerous packs of beings that all seem bent on making life difficult for an honest merchant. The world is a rich and wondrous treasure house, if people would only open their eyes and *look* at it; most folk, though, do not, and while the so-called "traditions" are well acquainted with wonder, they hoard it like misers, refusing trades while demanding tribute. Oh, one can do business with individual sorcerers, and if people don't want to trade there's no point in forcing them — bloody crusades are a waste. Too many wizards, though, are crazy, selfish and untrustworthy.

Fortunately, given their strange obsessions, witches and magicians are often easy to work around. Hermetic magi are easily bought; supposedly many Covenants are old Guild customers and sponsors! (Oh, and political rivals, too, but that's to be expected.) The Muslim wizards can be difficult hagglers, but the best of them understand value in ways any Guildsman can appreciate. Merchants in the Far

East often have difficulty with obnoxious "Dragon Wizards" in court (to say nothing of those hopping "Akashic" lunatics in the hills!), but compared to the ravages of weather and banditry, these are minor pests indeed. As for the babbling witches and frothing wildmen, the best that can be said is that they burn well.

Guildsmen save their most acerbic disdain for the various groups they refer to as "The Damned." Other Daedaleans wonder why; after all, isn't *everything* for sale to a Guildsman? But as any merchant knows, a bargain is only good if it's somewhat fair; each side might shave a bit off the other's price, but anyone who gives away *everything* is a fool, and fools rarely offer decent goods. To barter with one's immortal soul is worse than sacrilege — it's folly. Thus, Marauds and diabolists make lousy business partners.

In their courtly trade, some Floreati encounter mysterious walking corpses and bygone lords who didn't know enough to stay dead. While these... things... occasionally stand astride the halls of power, a wise Guildsman keeps his distance. An undead creature often has valuable secrets, influence and trinkets to trade, but — as many a careless merchant has discovered — they really *do* want blood in return...

As for shapechangers, faeries and suchlike beings — well, it'd be nice to be able to dismiss them as children's tales. Too many traveling merchants, though, can swear otherwise. Such demon-haunted night-folk seem dedicated to mischance. Although some faerie-tales mention *interesting* trade negotiations, the Guild's official policy is to let sleeping wolves (and other things) lie — and to run like hell if they wake. As for demons, spirits and the ghosts of the dead... well, such things are best left to churchmen and unworldly philosophers. Gold means little if you die trying to attain it.

Ksirafai: God's Secret Army

...we'll talk with them too —

Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out —

And take upon 's the mystery of things,

As if we were God's spies...

— William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The newest element of the Order of Reason draws on ancient roots, many of them entangled with courtly life. Spies and assassins (among other things), the Ksirafai find both recruits and ideas in the realms of mundane power, and spend much of their energy observing that same world, watching for threats to Reason among the ruling classes — Enlightened and otherwise.

After the Solificati defected from the Order of Reason in 1335, the elders realized that the Order needed a sub-Convention of wardens to oversee their fellowship. In 1336, a nameless group of Byzantine courtiers, Craftsmasons and Guildsmen laid the foundation for the so-called “Razors” — a sect of spies and enforcers who would safeguard the integrity of the Daedalean Order and occasionally implement its plans — not with purges and inquisitions, but simply with supervision... and occasional intervention.

But the leaders of the Order of Reason were not looking for mere spies or assassins when they created the Ksirafai. Any person with the wits and the guts to be a spy could be one, and any brute willing to kill on command could become an assassin. Perceptive souls among the Inner Circle realized the need for a group which could act as the conscience of the Order — and this is exactly how the Ksirafai see themselves. Certainly, these shadowy figures are expert spies, and in some cases, killers, after all, a conscience is something that oversees every action, and occasionally stabs painfully. But the Razors rarely spy for mere monetary profit, and they never kill without good reason.

Well, almost never. This world is, of course, subject to occasional mistakes. Only God is perfect, and some philosophers throw even that certainty into doubt.

Sharpened Smoke

Yes, we’re being deliberately vague about this “group.” By definition, the Ksirafai are supposed to be mysterious, ephemeral, wide open to interpretation and misdirection. Even if a player chooses a Ksirafai character, the “truths” behind the sect as a whole should remain totally unreachable. She should never get to “the top” of the organization because, in fact, it doesn’t really have one. Like sharpened smoke, the Razors cut deeply, then fade away.

It’s no accident that these covert courtiers inspired (if not created) the New World Order and its innumerable “truths.” Unlike the modern NWO, however, the Razors do not have an organized hierarchy, chain of command or protocol. Thus, the specifics of this “Convention” vary from agent to agent. When “hard truths” do surface, they’re always disputable or contradictory. The NWO rewrites history; aside from the prodigious secret archives kept by the Ksirafai lodges (archives that will someday be collected into one lost library), the Razors don’t write much down the first place.

Methods

In their own ways, the Ksirafai are philosophers. Members of this group are sworn to serve the cause of Reason, and they’re often chosen for their dedication to order, law and justice. However, deciding just what “Reason,” “order,” “law” and “justice” are can be a tricky matter indeed — especially when speed is essential, your “duties” include deception, manipulation and murder, and you have no one to rely upon except God and yourself.

For the Razors constitute an army without generals, ranks or battle plans. As the founders of the group recognized, a chain can snap. Therefore, the “organization” is a rope, not a chain. Individually, its strands are thin and fine, hard to see but easy to break. Wound together, though, they are strong, although they rarely touch one another, their weave makes them tougher, lighter and more flexible than any chain.

This flexibility demands extraordinarily clever agents and a miniscule seat of command. Once she finishes her training, a Ksirafai receives her instructions from a mentor — usually a more experienced agent. The mentor, in turn, gets his orders from a “house martin” — the local Magistrate, who often works in deep seclusion and disguise. (Like Mother Aphra von Freiburg, who’s described later in this chapter.) Once in the field, however, the Razor must use her own discretion.

Without an advisor close at hand, Ksirafai agents are educated and encouraged to analyze the morality of every deed, swiftly but carefully, before they strike. Some Razors — including many elder agents — are trained in academic philosophy, theology and debate. This training can lead a Ksirafai to make what may seem like strange decisions at times, but be rest assured, she has her reasons, and she considers them thoroughly before she acts.

When she *does* act, it is with the certainty of a barber’s blade-stroke. While other swashbuckler-types explode into action, the Ksirafai waits, assembles information, considers her options, and plans a course of action. Before she actually begins, she sets out several “escape routes” for the moment when everything goes to hell. If and when she has no time to plan, the Razor keeps her actions (and her Arts) within a very small sphere of influence. Blowing up a tower is not her way — she’d rather sneak past the guard, seduce the chamberlain, or chip a small but fatal crack in the weak spot at the tower’s base.

Membership

Ksirafai specialize in becoming that crack in the wall — or in becoming the mortar that fills the crack before the wall gives way. Thus, a Razor must be flexible in mind and body, able to adapt quickly to rapidly changing circumstances.

Entry Into the Razors

Such people are not generally made — they're born. Hence, Ksirafai also keep a close eye out for prospective recruits, both in and out of court. Noble or common birth means little — any Ksirafai has seen enough sharp stablehands and dullard dukes to know how little blood has to do with cleverness. According to the Razors' philosophy, a person's true soul is not dependent on ancestry, but on God's grace. Royalty is a mask human beings have constructed to identify their tribes. Only God knows the face beneath each mask.

With a little help from God, a Razor who spies a worthy prospect checks her out, then passes the information on to his mentor (and possibly the "house martin," too). If she seems to be a good candidate, the elder Ksirafai watches her, tests her, then sends her small favors — invitations to a ball, gifts of money or food, unexpected aid, and so forth — mixed with subtle hints about her beneficiary. Should the candidate be as clever as her sponsor seems to think she is, she'll catch on before long.

Apprenticeship

Initially, the candidate is offered a place among some secret, yet bogus, society; it may appear to be a charitable mission, a hidden order of monks, a Masonic lodge, etc. In actuality, it's a front group of *Etfalti*, the un-Enlightened allies of the Razors. Although these Brethren are kept far away from the truth about their allegiance, the "secret masters" of the order give a prospective initiate among them special treatment and training.

Called an Ignorant, the initiate endures a yearlong battery of tests and trials. If she seems aware or Enlightened by the end of that time, she's initiated through painful rituals derived from Pagan mystery cults. Only *then* is she promised a place within a fellowship that is obviously very important, but whose precise nature remains mysterious. Suffering visions of bloody-handed angels, the new Razor is encouraged to strive even further by the promise of greater revelations and a significant part in the Divine plan. By that time, she's either Enlightened, insane or dead. Given a new name and identity, she is set up in a distant place and given her first set of instructions....

This process of observation, initiation and subterfuge is tedious and difficult, especially for the sponsor and his Magistrate. Very, *very* few people make it as far as the *Etfalti*, and a bare handful of them become Ksirafai. During the apprenticeship, the sponsor, Magistrate and other Razors take careful stock of their prospective comrade. If she seems like a danger to herself or others, she is either misled or eliminated. By the time she actually reaches her final test, the Ignorant is a rather formidable character in her own right. If she survives to learn her new Arts, she'll be worth a dozen courtiers — and then some.

Organization

Secret even among secrets, the Ksirafai cannot sustain a formal system of rank and training. A loose confederacy of small lodges (each one controlled by a "house martin") employs six "field agents" apiece and channels information through intermediaries to the shadowy high council (sometimes known simply as "The Byzantines" — that being, of course, the nationality of most of the council's original members). Each field agent essentially acts alone. She may recognize one or two of her fellow Razors by name, but the rest of her lodge remains unknown, even to her. Only the "house martin" knows who all six of his agents are, and even he might not know where they all are at a given time.

Rank and privilege hold very little appeal for Ksirafai. The "Convention" boasts few official titles; every agent has enough resources to live comfortably, yet changes assignments often enough to keep her from growing complacent. Recruits tend to be hungry souls on an endless quest. The Razors give such folk a dream to capture, and for most of them that dream — and the means to chase it and serve God in the process — are all those agents need.

Most lodges are self-sufficient and self-contained. Aside from occasional aid and assignments from the Inner Circle, each Magistrate is trusted to mind local affairs on his own. Occasionally, loose "nets" of from six to a dozen Magistrates cooperate while simultaneously watching each other. These groups may include several former members of an old lodge who advanced together, although the Byzantines often prefer to split such groups up before they form a dangerous clique. Nets converge on areas of intense crisis or competition, such as Rome or Henry VIII's court. Even then, however, the Ksirafai have minimal contact with one another — though each one knows that others of her kind are out there somewhere. This deliberate paranoia tends to keep the Razors honest. After all, there's less chance of treachery when everyone concerned how easily she might be caught by surprise.

Discipline among the Ksirafai can be brutal... and permanent. Yet very few "formal" chastisements exist. No one is initiated into the Ksirafai without first proving her loyalty, dedication and efficiency. Once she does so, the Inner Circle considers it foolish to waste such talents with brutal demonstrations of "the price of failure." Simply put, these agents are too valuable to kill recklessly, or to mutilate without dire cause. Major failures often carry their own fatal penalties; lesser errors are usually treated as opportunities to refine one's skills. Disloyalty is rarely an issue, as very few Razors consciously betray their fellowship. Those who do rarely survive to be punished by the Magistrate — they usually die first.

Philosophy

Those who know a little about the Ksirafai think of the Razors' Arts as a disorderly mixture of potions, poisons, gadgets and tricks; those who know a little more whisper of shadowy spirit-invocations. Such misconceptions (deliberately seeded by the Razors themselves) underplay the "Convention's" own, fairly coherent philosophy of magick, science and faith.

To the Ksirafai, Creation is a maze of secrets, a hall of mirrors only God truly understands. Even so, man has tried eternally to understand the paths through that maze, if only for his own protection. In a way, the reasoning goes we are all spies under Heaven. The mundane spy roots out human secrets; the hedge-wizard or natural philosopher plays with the least of the higher enigmas; the magus, prophet or Daedalean gains access to greater orders of mystery and truth; and the true adept tries to understand them all. Despite a handful of mystical trappings, most Razors ultimately serve science and Reason, which they see as means to encompass the truths that one discovers. A good spy should be orderly and logical; a philosopher seeks the hidden facets of Creation.

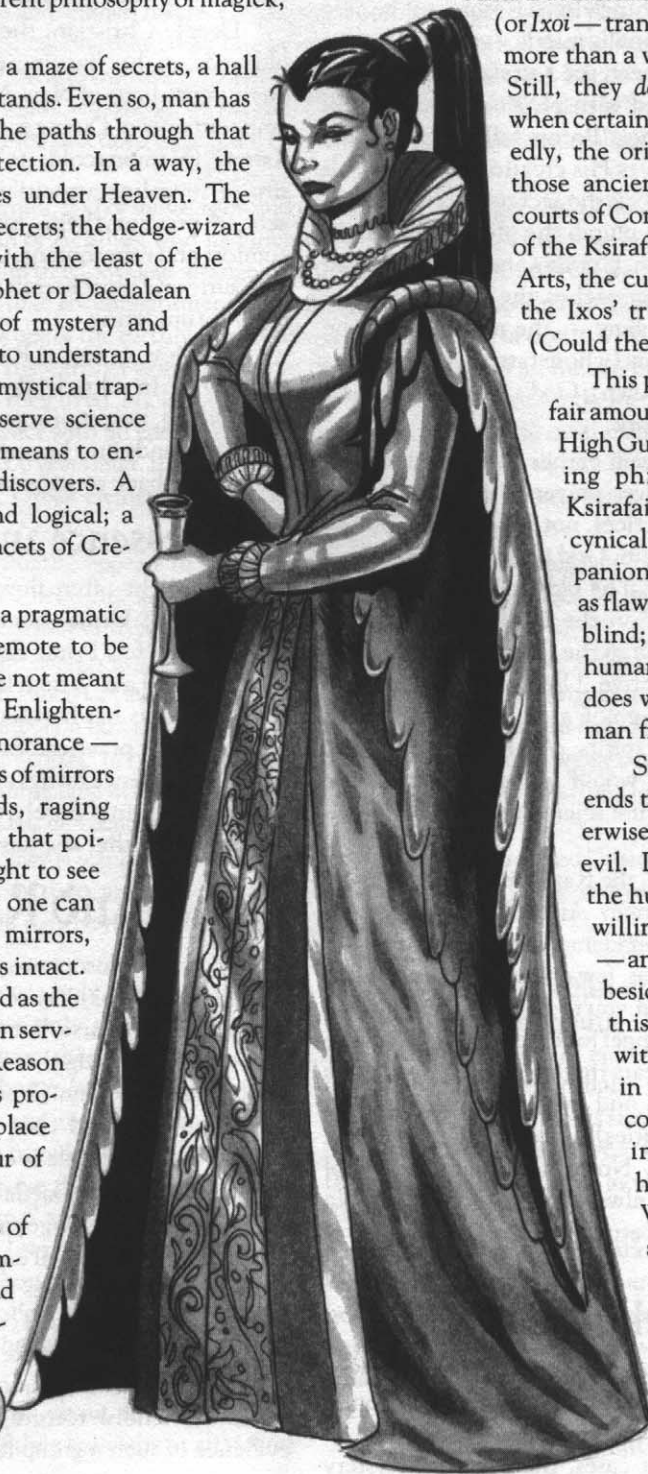
And yet the Razors are also a pragmatic bunch. Some secrets are too remote to be seen by human eyes; others were not meant to be. Too much of the wrong Enlightenment — or an excess of total ignorance — could conceivably bring the halls of mirrors down. In the gory battlefields, raging plagues and magickal atrocities that poison this world, a Ksirafai is taught to see the fingerprints of Hell. Before one can wander through God's hall of mirrors, one must first keep those mirrors intact. The Order of Reason is presented as the greatest weapon against chaos. In serving that Order, in helping Reason spread and prosper, the Razors protect Creation, safeguard man's place in it, and earn a privileged tour of God's own mirror-maze.

In the meantime, as agents of Reason, the Ksirafai feel themselves licensed to use lesser and partial truths, and even to acknowledge the temporary impenetrability of enigma. Like other Daedaleans, these

philosopher-agents are basically dubious of "old-fashioned" supernatural powers, and prefer to employ "cleaner" implements — simple potions, polished blades, handcrafted mechanisms purchased from honest Artisans.... Still, one uses what's at hand when the Devil drives, and the Devil drives the Ksirafai hard. Sometimes, Razors employ the kind of archaic, arcane magicks that they would keep from other Daedaleans. The secret Arts of the Ixos (or *Ixoi* — translations are uncertain) have more than a whiff of magick about them. Still, they *do* work, and they're useful when certain tasks are necessary. Supposedly, the original Byzantines employed those ancient techniques back in the courts of Constantinople. If the founders of the Ksirafai sanctioned these esoteric Arts, the current reasoning goes, surely the Ixos' tricks could not be harmful! (Could they...?)

This pragmatic approach shares a fair amount with the viewpoint of the High Guild. As spies and deep-thinking philosophers, however, the Ksirafai are actually rather more cynical than their gold-dazzled companions. Most Razors see humanity as flawed, greedy and willfully half-blind; walking in the shadows of human society, God's Secret Army does what has to be done to keep man from stumbling *too* badly.

Still, the Razors insist that the ends they serve *must* be just. Otherwise, their acts would be truly evil. Despite their doubts about the human race, most Ksirafai are willing to help save it from itself — and from a dozen other threats, besides. There's true nobility in this philosophy, albeit nobility with a dark tinge; like torturers in a just king's dungeon, they commit crimes that give meaning to an existence they half-suspect is meaningless. Wandering, hands outstretched, in God's mirror-maze, these dark angels see humanity capering on thin ice which stretches above an ocean of cold darkness. In between, devils beckon blind and foolish people to the edge



of the Abyss. But the Razors see what lies beneath their feet, and they dance with greater grace and caution than so-called "magi" do.

Or at least, that's how *they* tend to see things, anyway....

"Magick": Sacred Echoes

In keeping with this pragmatic approach, Ksirafai study a wide variety of Arts. If nothing else, a Razor must be able to understand — and occasionally mimic — many different disciplines. As a Daedalean sect, the Ksirafai teach a variation of *Ars Praeclarus* mixed with physic and a touch of miracle-work. Essentially, most Razors follow the "sacred clockworks" theory: God gives His creations certain tools and clues with which to unlock the secrets of His domain. While Artisans and Cosians plumb the physical depths of those secrets, and Gabrielites, Crafters and Celestial Masters employ more spiritual approaches, the Ksirafai balance both the sacred and the profane — the mystical and the practical. Like the Explorators (whose tatterdemalion Arts closely resemble the Razors' own), God's Secret Army uses whatever tools happen to work.

Some of those tools seem rather "unscientific"; alchemy, Solomonian pentacles, prayers and folk charms resemble superstitionist practices, not rational disciplines. But as any Razor could explain, God provides strange keys for His spiritual clockworks. The old rites of High Ritual Magick are, after all, based on the Lord's revelations to Solomon and his artisans. (Or so the Daedaleans claim....) They're dangerous, but effective. Used with a pure heart, these rites and invocations grant a mortal access to the angels and lesser, helpful spirits. As for alchemy and herbalism, well, a Ksirafai would argue that these *are* sciences — just not ones future scientists would acknowledge as such.

Given their sacred duty, the Razors must occasionally bend the rules God gave to man. After all, *somebody* must be able to deal with the darker elements of the spirit world, and aside from the Gabrielites, few other Daedaleans seem prepared for that task. When you're fighting demons, you might have to call upon an angel for help. And so, with the sacred echoes of their forebears ringing in their ears, some Ksirafai command powerful and even malevolent spirits (though *never* diabolical entities) to appear, then to depart when the crisis has passed. Note that complex rites of purification and abnegation always follow such rituals. No Razor wants to become perpetually fettered to the sort of beings she employs.

Daemons and Seekings

A mystical sect that confronts and probes mystery inevitably views Enlightenment itself as a mystery. Sometimes it appears as a captivating puzzle — God's hall of mirrors personified. In most cases, though, that mystery

provides the proverbial "dark wood" in which frightening angels and terrible spirits offer both guidance and rebuke. Although a Razor sees God's maze as a wondrous puzzle, it's a puzzle fraught with dangers. By later standards, most Ksirafai would be considered delusional, depressive fanatics — "...chariots of wrath/ By demons driven," as the Bard would say. Usually, the demons (or Daemons) in question evoke the grandest and yet most terrifying aspects of God.

Deeply Christian, the average Razor sees angels, not old gods, as her inspiration. These entities are not the quaint guardians of New Age fables, but rather monstrous embodiments of Divine fury. Wrapped in terrible beauty, a Ksirafai Daemon scolds its "pupil," tormenting her with old sins or revealing atrocities that might happen unless she acts to prevent them. Every so often, the angel offers comfort and refreshment. Given the vicious circumstances that surround most Ksirafai, however, the Daemon is often fairly intimidating.

Needless to say, a Razor's Seeking is not a pleasant experience. In solitude, the Resplendent mortifies her flesh with fasting, prayer or scourging, then weeps and trembles as she descends into her own personal underworld in hopes of bringing back some greater light....

Quintessence and Tass

That light often flows outward in the form of raw Quintessence. Unlike her mercantile cousins in the Guild, the Razor prefers Prime Essence in its energy form, not in materialized Tass. Which is not to say that she won't *use* the stuff if she gets her hands on it; as we've said, a Ksirafai is nothing if not practical. Even so, the unfettered current of pure Quintessence brings a feeling of peace and certainty to a tormented Razor. Surely, this blessing is the touch of God, reassuring her that she has done well, and is forgiven.

Ropes and Razors

To the philosopher-spies, other Awakened factions are, above all, subjects of study. The Ksirafai have their preferences, of course, but to strike without understanding, or to reject knowledge because it seems distasteful, seems to be anathema to them. True, the Razors *do* serve the Order of Reason and God (not necessarily in that order), but beyond that very little is certain about them.

To their fellow Daedaleans, the members of this non-Convention are bogeymen, ale-pot phantoms that sometimes seem *just* real enough to be threatening. Rumors about masked emissaries to the Inner Circle have swirled throughout the White Towers for over a century, but no one but outside the Circle seems to know how true those tales might be. Granted, some folk have "confessed" (usually under fiendish torture) to being "Ksirafai," but no hard evidence of such a group has ever appeared.

The Ixos

Most people have heard the old myth regarding the wooden horse of Troy. The saying “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts” recalls that infamous subterfuge thousands of years after the fact. But did Odysseus’ fatal trick really involve a giant wooden horse? Or was the fall of Troy brought about by some less spectacular (but more efficient) means?

According to Nicias of Thrace, a Byzantine scholar of great repute whose influence on the Inner Circle is said to have included the foundation of the Ksirafai, an elite troupe of Greek spies became the *real* “horse” within Troy’s walls. Supposedly these men and women had received special training in deception, illusion and concealment; with mundane skills and mystickal talents, they crept, one by one, into Troy, worked themselves into the highest ranks of the defenders, then killed Paris and the other Trojan leaders as the Trojans slept. Nicias claimed to have preserved these secrets in a treatise entitled *Concerning the True Fall of Troy, and the Brave Warriors Who Did Bring it About*. Rumor has it that some of the elite Arts practiced by Ksirafai have their origins in Greece, and derive their foundation from Nicias’ work.

Legends claim that Hermes, god of messengers and escort of the dead, granted Odysseus five magickal tricks in return for a favor: The death of Achilles, who had incurred Hermes’ wrath when that hero desecrated the body of Hector. Heretical myths claim that Odysseus arranged Achilles’ assassination, and received Hermes’ gifts, plus a sixth “bonus” for his treachery. These six enchantments included invisibility, face-changing, silence, illusion, a sleeping spell, and the ability to cross out of the earthly world and over the threshold of death. This last was a mixed blessing; like Hermes, Odysseus and his warriors would recognize the eventual fate of all human beings, and would become obsessed with it even while they lived. Nicias, who did not believe in the Greek gods, interpreted this to mean that the Greek warriors made a pact with an early Hermetic cult (and perhaps some necromancers), and received spells that the Razors use nearly 2000 years later. If this were true, it would tie a slender, distant thread between the Hermetic Order, the Ksirafai, and the Greek elements among the Euthanatos — the Pomegranate Deme and a budding sect called the Golden Chalice.

Sadly, this influential treatise appears to have been lost when the Turks sacked Constantinople. Bootlegged copies (often in Arabic) have been circulating around the Order of Reason for decades, but Nicias is long dead and no one can verify the authenticity of those “copies.”

One of the many things lost appears to have been the name of this elite Greek troupe. Although Ksirafai teachings refer to these forebears as Ixos (a word of uncertain meaning), most Razors use the word as both a singular and plural form. Some sources employ the proper Greek pluralization Ixoi or Xoi, but others (including Nicias, who was himself Greek) used Ixos as both a singular and plural name. The “copies” of Nicias’ work are not helpful, especially considering that many of them are second-, third-, or even fourth-hand translations in Arabic, Latin, bastard Greek, and even French and English. Perhaps these flawed reproductions are all that remains of a band of historical ghosts.

Or perhaps the whole story is just one more fabrication in the Razors’ so-called “history.” For despite the many tales of Nicias and his wisdom, there are no existing records of such a person in the archives of either White Tower. Like the Ixos, Nicias himself may be no more than a mythic phantom.

To one another, the Razors are only slightly less enigmatic. Their Etfalti allies know only that some cult of “secret masters” supposedly gives them money, advice, influence and knowledge in exchange for occasional favors. New members receive training and instructions, but very seldom encounter other folk who admit to belonging to their fellowship. Elder Razors have their own opinions of the group, its Daedalean “cousins” and the night-folk and mortals in its shadow, but such observations are based more on each Ksirafai’s experiences than on some form of “party line” that all Razors are told to follow. Only the Magistrates and Maximi seem to know what’s really going on, and they’re not talking.

So what do the Razors think about their comrades? What’s their eventual agenda (if they have one at all)? And

who, if anyone, guides their silent knives? The eeriest thing about these solitary courtier/ killers is that their loyalties and allegiances seem as ephemeral as smoke. Every Razor knows that she’ll eventually receive instructions about a certain task, the resources she’ll need to accomplish it, and occasional advice about what (and what *not*) to do. Beyond that, the greater picture is as mysterious to her as it is to the Razor’s prey.

Somewhere in the darkness, a rope woven over a century ago is being slipped around *someone’s* throat. Who holds the hands of this garrote? Whom do they serve (if anyone)? Who is on the receiving end of this surprise? And what do the agents of this silent conspiracy know about the greater plan behind their deeds?

The answers are as silent as razors in the darkness.

Of Recurring Cast

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players...*
— William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Courtly and swashbuckling tales have their share of common character “archetypes.” After all, where one has rules and systems, one finds that certain personalities always seem to find a niche within that structure — or that the systems themselves breed very similar offspring. Some of these types may provide models for players’ characters, whereas others are better suited to be “bit players” under the Storyteller’s control. Some work best as heroes, and some make good villains, but most — given the subtle shape of courtly morality — can be either, or neither, or both, depending on who you are and what part you play in the courtly drama.

Incidentally, when you’re looking for dedicated (and deadly) villains for a **Sorcerers Crusade** chronicle, it’s only natural to think about the Fallen. **Infernalism: The Path of Screams** details a number of tempters and traitors, several of whom are quite appropriate for courtly adventures. (See the “Templates” section in Chapter II, specifically the Alchemist, Black Knight, Bon Vivant, Devil’s Whore, Maggot, Rake-Hell, Serpent, Torturer and Usurer.) These corrupters make highly effective adversaries, but by their nature they tend to congregate around the “dark and foul” end of the scale. If you, as a Storyteller, want more ambiguous opponents, or foes who won’t cause unspeakable devastation if they win, look to other types. After all, politics can often get complicated and difficult enough when every other character isn’t dedicated to outright evil. In point of fact, most unlovely deeds are committed out of what seem to be the *best* of intentions. That’s one of the truths that make courtly plots so tragic — and so much fun to run!

The following character “templates” may be magi, mortals, or something else entirely. (Remember, a vampiric prince is probably more prince than vampire, and will act accordingly.) The “Notes” within each listing offer a few suggestions, but the final motivations, personalities, genders and abilities of these characters depend on the needs of your story and troupe; one Young Romantic might be a hotheaded, poetic peasant boy, while another could be a flirtatious, if sensible, princess. Each template is presented as an illustration, not as a “character class” with set traits and appearance. For suggested game Traits, see the “Courtier Characters” sidebar, page 60. Now then, given that the latter end of the Dark Renaissance period gives us the richest source of strong characters we could ever desire, we’ll present each example in Shakespearean terms:

Ophelia: The Strange Child

It takes all sorts — and this sort really doesn’t seem to belong around the court. The offspring of some member of the ruling family or of a senior official, the Strange Child is, well, strange. She isn’t much interested in the courtly world, but wanders around talking about trivia — flowers and animals, human nature, arts, the meaning of words. Some people call her “simple,” but it’s possible that her ramblings exhibit a certain abstract intelligence... or mystical Enlightenment.

Image: People call this Child “touched” or “crazy,” and some mutter about witchcraft — which may or may not be justified. Fortunately, few people feel threatened by her. She seems to be *quite* the romantic figure, especially to protective folks. Although she may be perfectly mortal, there’s a fey air about this character. The Strange Child seems to be lost in some other world.

Roleplaying Hints: Why cannot others see what is so plain to you? If only they could, they’d cease their foolish games and wonder at the miracle of each passing moment, each frozen speck of time.

Notes: To all appearances, this character dwells just on Faerie’s edge, or on the cusp of Awakening. A Storyteller can have a lot of fun keeping her players guessing at the “truth” behind the Strange Child, and a player could craft a haunting character from such an oddly perceptive girl. If she is attuned to the supernatural world (and, again, that’s not certain), she may be apprenticed to a Verbena magus, a Seer, or to a lesser hedge-witch. It’s also dangerously possible that she’s slipping toward Maraud status. But perhaps she’s just a fey-struck mortal, blessed with some small, untrained power — *Awareness* or *Faerie Affinity*, say, or perhaps *Spark of Life*. Then again, maybe she’s just weird....



Lear: The Aging Lord

At the top of the social pyramid sits whichever king, queen or lord rules the court. Such a position is usually held for life, and despite all the dangers of usurpation or conquest, such rulers *do* sometimes grow old. Unfortunately, being accustomed to power and command, they may also become especially set in their ways, and do not take well to questions or disobedience. This can make court life especially difficult, as the courtiers most likely to advance in such an atmosphere will either be toadies (willing to nod at everything the old lord says), rebels (embittered by the sclerosis of the state), or exploiters (preying on the weaknesses of sycophants and rebels alike). Sensible, timely, peaceful change and compromise grow impossible; everyone must choose between tyranny and chaos.

Image: The Aging Lord epitomizes control and wisdom gone to seed. He (or sometimes *she*) often wears ornate, archaic finery and surrounds himself with retainers who are nearly as old and conservative as he is. Years of rulership have weakened his body and mind, but inflamed his temper. If he's Awakened, the situation can be even worse — he probably wields considerable power in a very arbitrary style. Unfortunately, this type is all too common in the strongholds of both the Traditions and the Daedaleans. With mystick or alchemical Arts, such men and women usually extend their years to inhuman spans, and drag their rivalries and grudges out for decades... or even centuries.

Roleplaying Hints: You did not grow this crown from your head by God's own grace! You've fought and bled for it, and *no one* is going to tell you how to manage your affairs! By Heaven and Hell, you're not dead yet; until that hour, your word is law.

Notes: Most mortal rulers die of disease or murder before they reach this state; those who do not often seem to go mad, and carry the kingdom with them into their insanity. Ancient magi, on the other hand, seem frighteningly susceptible to this dementia, and often command awesome powers in addition to their political influence. Common Traits include titanic Background ratings, Merits like *Title*, *Ties* and *Iron Will*, and Flaws like *Absent-minded*, *Age*, *Infirm* and *Obsession*.

Do remember that the Aging Lord is more than just an annoying old bully, though. Once, he had both power and vitality, and flashes of his old vigor may still come through occasionally. He should never be underestimated; nor should he be allowed to drag the court down with him....

Henry V: The Dynamic Lord

Despite the cynical opinions of many courtiers, some lords are driven, determined, inspiring and perhaps even idealistic. Some are even competent rulers! Such a Dynamic Lord sets the tone for his court; courtiers and servants who oppose his plans tend to be swept away — after all, he

has the power to dismiss all naysayers from his sight. Despite his enthusiasm, such a man can be difficult to deal with. In his mind, he's quite right about whatever he might demand. Neighboring states, too, worry about the Dynamic Lord; this is an age where few rulers really need an excuse to go to war.

Despite his near-mania, people usually enjoy working for a Dynamic Lord. A brave servant or willing ally can gather fantastic amounts of glory under such a ruler! Still, the Lord might be a little too exciting for his kingdom's good. Chances are, he'll accumulate a host of enemies who may take their anger out on everyone associated with him.

Image: Charismatic and eloquent, the Dynamic Lord dominates any room he enters. Vigorous and often temperamental, he probably has huge appetites for food, knowledge and pleasure. Our Lord's a near-saint to some people and a tyrannical demon to others. The greatest heroes and the most infamous despots are often cut from the same cloth; depending on who you are, they can even be combined in the same man.

Roleplaying Hints: Never rest. Never sleep. Weakness is for whimpering women and courtly fops. You are a man (or woman) of action, and you cannot and will not slow down until the crows begin picking at your corpse — if even then!

Notes: Dynamic Lords who are Awakened rouse plenty of attention from their friends and enemies alike. Vaunting ambition is admirable, but it's dangerous too, especially in a magus. Most sects consider discretion and subtlety to be virtues, and the Dynamic Lord has little use for either one. True, magick demands determination and willpower, but these should be used for higher causes, not to quest for mundane glory.

Such fiery characters tend to gather Merits and Flaws in huge amounts. The former usually involve charisma, will and influence (Bardic Gift, Code of Honor, Cupid's Gift, Enchanting Gaze, Honeyed Tongue, Iron Will, Noble Bearing), while the latter mark him for eventual ruin (Cursed, Dark Fate, Dark Secret, Enemy, Infamy, Magical Rival and Obsession). Although he's often *very* good at what he does, this character might be extremely incompetent, too. In that case, court intrigues usually revolve around doing *exactly* what he commands, removing him from authority, or trying to contain the damage to manageable levels. Such courts are never easy places to be.

Macbeth: The Driven Usurper

Courtly power plays are dangerous at the best of times; some people, though, really *are* determined to win at any cost. The Driven Usurper may have a really good reputation on the surface; underneath his apparent charm, however, the fires of ambition have consumed him. Given a chance, he'll either claw his way to the top (then become a tyrant

to be brought down), or be he'll be destroyed by all the enemies he makes when he attempts his coup.

Image: This character is an obsessive courtier whose actions nearly always serve his own agendas. He's probably skilled in the fields of politics, warfare, rhetoric and subterfuge; in most cases, he's charming to boot. If the Usurper has been magickally trained, he'll either exploit his powers (dangerously) for mundane advancement, or play tricky games among the Awakened. He may be fallen to Infernalism, but can just as easily be driven by the internal demons of pride and ambition. Awakened or not, this treacherous soul has convinced himself that his advancement will serve some genuinely good cause. Even in that case, though, his amoral drive to power may attract the approval (and perhaps the support) of darker forces.

Roleplaying Hints: Destiny has lent you grace. Everything you have ever experienced has groomed you for the moment when you assume your birthright. You would, of course, prefer *not* to have to use underhanded methods. Then again, all temples are built on the backs of slaves and the bones of martyrs, so you're in good company.

Notes: Few Driven Usurpers are stupid enough to reveal their ambition; rather, they place themselves in glory's path by being especially good servants, then wait for the right moment. Our "friend" has probably woven a complex net of alliances (the Allies, Influence and Spies Backgrounds) to help him make his move. If he is a magus, the Usurper might specialize in Mind magick, then use it to maneuver people ever so slightly until everyone is (more or less) where he wants them.

Hamlet: The Thinking Prince

These days, the ruling classes recognize the value of a general education as well as practical training in rulership and warfare. Some nobles even *enjoy* the process. Although European courts still suffer from medieval ignorance, this state of affairs is changing rapidly. Now, a courtier is expected to be well read and eloquent — a *gentleman*, not a brute. Such enrichment yields mixed rewards. Some "scholar-princes" are academic marvels, but cannot actually *rule*. Others try to apply book-learning when they come to power, successfully or otherwise. Sometimes, when confronted with a serious problem, the Thinking Prince lives up to the humanist ideal and brings a fresh perspective to the subject; but occasionally, like Hamlet, he's paralyzed by uncertainty until things have gone beyond salvation.

Confronted with immediate threats, the Thinking Prince often quibbles when he should act. He might mean well; then again, he could adopt a distant, academic morality in which only ideals, not real circumstances, matter. True, it's usually better to have a ruler who thinks too *much* than one who doesn't think at all; all the same, this character might need some prodding, lest he be swept away

by his meditations... or suddenly snap and go completely irrational.

Image: A Thinking Prince is often well groomed and genteel. His manners are as polished as his sword, and he seems *most* attractive to artists, ladies and philosophers. Men of action, on the other hand, may consider him a fop and mock his intellectual approach as frippery. If things go badly, he might fall to brooding, or concoct wild schemes to test pet theories before he actually makes decisions.

Roleplaying Hints: *Let me be cruel, not unnatural; I will speak daggers to her, but use none.*

Notes: A Thinking Prince may be mystically aware, even Awakened; some study Hermetic magick (casually or intensively), while others dabble in alchemy, and still others acquire the basics of the *Ars Cupiditae* from High Guild scholars, or support the Celestial Masters' research. Although it's usual for a woman to be educated extensively in this period, a willful princess, queen or merchant's daughter might rival a scholar with her learning. Regardless of his or her sex, the thinking ruler makes an ideal Mentor or Patron (as those Backgrounds) for players' characters. His court might well provide sanctuary or funding for philosopher-scientists, magicians, or even both.



Prince Hal: The Riotous Prince

A royal heir or privileged child usually has power and wealth to spare, but lacks responsibility or restraint. All too often, this inequality encourages a life of carousing and self-indulgence. The courts of Europe are full of dissolute young men and women who are due, eventually, to govern the land. Someday, their elders hope, these kids will work off their wildness and settle down to respectable nobility. Occasionally, however, these rakes and harpies turn courts

ITEM, SECOND: MASTERS OF THE DANSE

into battlefields of social ruin, sexual license and capricious tyranny.

The Riotous Prince can be a lot of fun to hang around with; he tends to buy drinks for his friends, splurge on gifts, and shelter his companions from the law. "He" might be a merchant's favorite son, a pampered daughter, a bastard child, or even heir to the throne. Faced with a crisis, this character might sober up and become the leader his parents always hoped for. If he does, however, he'll probably disown his friends and slough off his old persona for a new and vigorous challenge... or destroy himself in the process.

Image: Everything that is frivolous, fashionable, exciting and sexy can be found on or around this character's person. He's very charming in a roguish sort of way, and can out-party seasoned mercenaries. Depending on his family and personality, he might carry a hint of conscience; then again, he could be a vicious thug who uses money, people and the law as amusingly breakable toys.

Roleplaying Hints: Oh, we did *that* last week. What new games are there to play? Did you say *stop*!?! Don't you know who my father is?

Notes: For hell-raising adventurer-types, this spoiled youngster is a godsend. He (or she) might be a Patron, an Ally, or even a player's character. This firebrand usually has Resources and Influence to burn, and he does so at a frightening rate. Chances are, he'll *lose* a few Background dots simply from over-indulgence — after all, even a royal treasury has limits!

A Riotous Prince might occasionally Awaken, which could teach the brat some self-discipline. Unfortunately, if he takes a dilettante interest in the supernatural, he's rather more likely to pursue dark paths for amusement's sake. After all, power should be used for entertainment! *Decadent* cults number some frighteningly well known names among their ranks. Fortunately, noble offspring tend to be watched quite closely by shrewd observers, Awakened and mundane alike; sometimes a Riotous character finds himself diverted away from *real* harm by a helpful magus or hidden agent. Then again, sometimes he'll fall right into the trap, and require rescuing....

Puck: The Otherworldly Interloper

Every so often, courtly intrigues feature some weird servitor or uncanny visitor who shows up just long enough to utterly complicate things. Sometimes this inhuman entity works for a human courtier (usually in secret) or other interested party; very often, it simply appears when its own affairs overlap those of mortal kings or kingmakers. In any case, the creature has its own agenda at heart, and displays unearthly powers that give it a distinct advantage over human courtiers — charms, prophecy, elemental command and so forth. Such creatures easily overwhelm the

un-Awakened; magi, however, are more equal to the challenge.

Image: In game terms, this unsettling creature can be anything the Storyteller wants to throw in. Perhaps she's a vampire lord with a secret alliance to the Duke; or the ghost of a murdered princess who craves revenge; or the imp of some secretive sorcerer who hides behind an innocent mask; or the demon chained in the dungeon and fed on a steady diet of trespassers. Either way, the Otherworldly Interloper unbalances the delicate political scales, usually with catastrophic results.

Roleplaying Hints: *Lord, what fools these mortals be!*

Notes: To avoid a "mad monster party" situation, the Storyteller should keep the Interloper in the background during most of the tale, setting it free only at the most dramatic moments. Such characters are usually rare in mortal courts (although this isn't always the case — witness *Macbeth*), but they tend to appear more frequently when magick and politics walk together. For sample Traits, agendas and story suggestions, see *Crusade Lore* (Chapter III), *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion* (Chapter VI), *The Bygone Bestiary*, or *Vampire: The Dark Ages* and its supplements *Book of Storyteller Secrets* and *Werewolf: The Dark Ages*.



Grave-Digger: The Scut

Powerful people make big messes. And afterward, *someone* has to clean 'em up. All courts are filled with scuts — the stable-sweepers, cinder-scrubbers, grave-diggers and so forth — who tend the ugly chores the highborn leave undone. Although bullied and dismissed by their so-called "betters," these wretches have their own resources. Being nameless, they move about virtually unseen, unrecognized

Courtier Characters

All courtiers are not created equal. A Turkish harem eunuch is not going to have the same skill-set as an Elizabethan advisor or a Florentine assassin. Still, some disciplines are essential in court, especially if one has been trained in *Ars Cupiditiae*.

This being the Renaissance — in most of Europe, anyway — learning is considered a quite valuable. A person is often measured by the disciplines he (or even she) has mastered, while a dullard is good for nothing except stable-cleaning, and perhaps not even that! The same is true in the faraway courts of China and the Islamic Empire. Wisdom and schooling are marks of distinction, and a man of diverse expertise is considered superior to the man who does only one thing well. Thus, any character (player or Storyteller) who wishes to be taken seriously at court had better have a few choice Abilities on his or her character sheet.

For general purposes, the character templates in the rulebook (pp. 275-282) can serve as starting-points for swashbuckling types. (Again, player or non-player alike.) Specialized characters, however, will often be trained in several Abilities. A given character's dot-level will, of course, depend on his expertise in the field, but certain Traits are nearly universal among most professions:

Advisor: Academics, Culture, Etiquette, Law, Linguistics, Politics, Riding, Subterfuge

Assassin/Spy: Alertness, Brawl, Disguise, Linguistics, Melee, Poisons, Stealth, Subterfuge; many also have Archery, Elusion, Empathy, Firearms, Politics or Seduction, too

Bishop: Academics, Etiquette, Expression, Instruction, Linguistics (Latin, if nothing else), Logic, Politics, Research, Symbolism, Theology

Bodyguard: Alertness, Archery, Brawl, Dodge, Etiquette, Intimidation, Intrigue, Linguistics, Melee, Politics, Riding

Courtesan (as opposed to common trollop): Academics, Empathy, Etiquette, Expression, Linguistics, Politics, Seduction

Elite Guardsman: Alertness, Brawl, Carousing, Craft (weaponsmith), Linguistics, Melee, Politics, Riding, Subterfuge

Enforcer: Brawl, Intimidation, Linguistics, Melee, Stealth, Torture

Entertainer: Carousing, Empathy, Etiquette, Expression, Politics, Subterfuge, and appropriate skill(s) of choice — Acrobatics, Artist, Athletics, Dancing, Musician, Singing, Symbolism... and often Larceny.

Merchant: Academics, Crafts (as appropriate to goods), Empathy, Expression, Leadership, Linguistics, Science (mathematics), Subterfuge

Nobleman: Academics, Etiquette, Hunting, Intrigue, Law, Leadership, Linguistics, Melee (or Fencing), Politics, Riding, Subterfuge

Noblewoman: Academics, Crafts (as appropriate), Etiquette, Expression, Intrigue, Law, Leadership, Linguistics, Musician, Politics, Riding, Seneschal, Subterfuge

(Culture and Dancing are also considered signs of good breeding for both men and women in many courts of the age.)

Priest, Monk or Nun: Academics, Crafts (as appropriate), Expression, Linguistics (Latin), Logic, Meditation, Research, Symbolism, Theology. Many monks and nuns also study Enigmas, Hearth Wisdom, Medicine or Science, too.

Scholar: Academics, Instruction, Linguistics, Research, Symbolism. Areas of intense study include Culture, Enigmas, Invention, Lore, Medicine, Occult, Politics, Science (any) or Theology; any scholar will have at least two dots in his area of expertise, and will probably have four or five, instead.

Servant (high-ranking): Alertness, Crafts (as appropriate to position), Empathy, Etiquette (often three to five dots), Leadership, Linguistics, Politics, and other skills appropriate to job — Academics, Animal Ken, Hunting, Law, Research, Riding or Seneschal.

Servant (low-ranking): Alertness, Brawl, Carousing, Crafts (as appropriate to position), Empathy, Etiquette (often one to three dots), and other skills appropriate to job — Animal Ken, Hunting, Riding.

(Note that most servants have Intrigue, Stealth and Subterfuge, too; never underestimate the help!)

These Traits are not *required* for all characters of the type. They are, however, considered part of "basic training" for the position or profession. As an *optional rule* (Storyteller's discretion), a courtier character may have at least one "free die" in each of the Traits listed for his profession, even if he has not purchased any dots in that Trait. This "free die" is essentially a Dice Pool of one, reflecting at least a rudimentary understanding of the skill.

Oh, and yes, Linguistics is essential for almost any courtier. Most courts of any consequence host representatives from foreign lands, and he who cannot speak at least a *bit* of French, Latin or German is lost.

Useful Merits and Flaws

(For specifics, see *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*, pp. 113-137.)

Courtly life has a way of nourishing certain traits, to good *and* ill effect. Although no courtier is required to have Merits or Flaws (except, perhaps, for certain appropriate Titles), swashbuckling characters tend to have one or more of the following Merits, Flaws, or both:

- **Appropriate Merits:** Code of Honor, Cupid's Gift, Graceful, Honeyed Tongue, Letter of Commission, Natural Linguist, Noble Bearing, Noble Blood, Ties (very common — *duh!*), Title (likewise), and Well-Traveled.

Other helpful but uncommon Merits include: Ambidextrous, Bardic Gift, Beast Affinity (especially for servants), Enchanting Gaze, Ghoul, Hands of Daedalus, Innocent, Iron Will, Poison Resistance, Renaissance Man, True Faith, and True Love (see *The Princess Bride...* or *Romeo and Juliet*.)

- **Appropriate Flaws:** Age, Beholden (very common), Dark Secret (likewise), Deformity (every court has at least one deformed "mascot"), Enemy (what courtier *doesn't* have them?), Family Enmity, Inconvenient Alliance, Infamy, Infirm, Oathbreaker, Obsession, and Stumbletongue.

Other courtly but uncommon Flaws include: Absent-Minded, Bard's Tongue (very dangerous!), Bound, Child (for heirs, prodigies and bastards), Coward, Craven Image, Criminal Marks (like de Winter's brand in *The Three Musketeers*), Cursed, Dark Fate, Geas, Haunted (hello, Hamlet and Macbeth!), Magickal Rival, and Religious Aberrant.

- **Devilish Servitors:** A particularly corrupt courtier (preferably a Storyteller character) might also possess Infernal Merits (Unshockable, Demonic Tutor, Demonic Heritage), Flaws (Repulsive to Animals, Bitter Tongue, Infernal Aura, Cannibal), or Investments at the Storyteller's discretion. See **Infernalism: The Path of Screams**, Chapter III, for specifics. Naturally, such a character will be on very shaky ground, even in a decadent court. Talk about dark secrets!

and often unchallenged. Hence, a scut makes a wonderful spy, especially considering that he probably bears a grudge against the bluebloods who have him clean their shit up every day....

Image: Tired, slovenly, often barefoot and ragged, the lowest of the low never seem to get any rest at all. When he finally gets to lie down and sleep, the scut calls cold stone or foul straw his bed. Rare is the scut who lives to old age; more often than not, this character is doomed — unless some new circumstances were to grant him freedom.

Roleplaying Hints: You know your place, but you don't have to like it.

Notes: A player's character of truly low birth might begin his life as a scut who Awakened one day and decided to change his lot in life. It's no fun being an outcast, but magick can rewrite the social rules a bit....

Even if the scut isn't a magus, he might provide some useful mood or story elements. A character with the Background: *Spies* probably has a few Scuts at her beck and call; if she's at all conscientious, she might get drawn into a story at the very lowest social strata. After all, even slaves have lives and dreams, and a lowly scut might change a wizard's destiny.

Cordelia: The Endangered Princess

In both fairy tales and tragedies, court intrigues have *victims*, for heroes to aid and villains to crush. In the cutthroat world of royalty and power, the heir to power — or anyone close to her — is never truly safe.

Note that this character isn't necessarily a naïve and feeble dupe for bold adventurers. (Nor is the vulnerable heir necessarily female, but let's run with the cliché for now.) She may well be educated, shrewd and fairly quick-witted. During one particular crisis, however, she's over-matched by those who want her dead or imprisoned; if she's sensible, she'll know it's time to run and hide. As a child of the nobility, though, this Princess probably has at least a streak of pride, and she may well be too high-minded to handle a dangerous situation with the flexibility that it demands. Even if she *can* win on her own terms, however, she desperately needs someone to watch her back.

Image: Traditionally, the Princess (or Prince, to be fair) is quite beautiful, charming, and unusually talented in some non-combative way. Although she's of little use in a fight, this heir is often a bold and charismatic leader — which is why her enemies want her out of the way in the first place.

Roleplaying Hints: Well, this could be played either way: Are you a Princess Leia type who'd just as soon blast her foes as look at them? Or are you a shy and kindly jewel who might grow up to be a legendary ruler, assuming you live to grow at all? Both extremes offer plenty of options other than "Help me! <shriek!> Help me! Oooh!"

Notes: All kingdoms, it seems, have a fetching heir or two. Depending on the setting, our Princess might be the heir to more than just *mundane* power, or she may have acquired exotic Arts along the way. If this royal girl *does* understand the ways of magick, she'll be entangled in even more tortuous plots, with far deadlier foes. An Awakened heir, you see, is a deadly threat to any faction she doesn't actively support, and they'll try hard to bring her down while it's still easy to do so. Another option, of course, assumes the Princess is utterly mundane, and facing night-folk or an Awakened foe — in which case she'll need all the help she can get.

Lady Macbeth: The Manipulative Spouse

Although court life grants its women more freedom and power than other walks of life, men still decidedly rule the 15th and 16th centuries. That's not to say that these powerful men don't take advice from shrewd women in their families, though; unfortunately, these domestic allies can sometimes be more dangerous than their husbands....

Sadly, most men in this era eye a strong-willed woman with suspicion. Any wife who gives her husband the occasional sensible suggestion runs the risk of being called a Jezebel. That being said, there are plenty of Lucrezia Borgias and Olympia Maidalchini ruling kings, popes and princes from the rumpled side of the bed. In a man's world governed by arranged weddings and masculine laws, what other choice does an ambitious woman have?

Image: Any powerful spouse or lover could fill this character's shoes. Perhaps she's a brilliant, stunning beauty; or a dowdy but whip-smart matron; or a sharp-tongued harridan; or a coldly distant muse. This "spouse" might have several men (none of them her husband) under her sway, too. Like Veronica Franco, she could be a courtesan of unusual wit and favor. Either way, she's shrewd and cunning. In most cases, her rivals will be opposing everyone but her.

Roleplaying Hints: Sometimes a woman's gotta do what a woman's gotta do.

Notes: While many sorcerers would consider it beneath themselves to hide behind a mundane spouse, some believe more in goals than in dignity. Consider the Verbena witch married off to a minor noble, the Ksirafai who serves her Order in any way that works, or the Infernalist who rots out an entire city government with a few well-placed spells and seductions. Such sirens choose husbands or lovers who can be manipulated easily, yet who are not *entirely* stupid. Soon, the Spouse knows more about her partner's affairs than he does.

A really effective (and potentially deadly) combination ensues when both the husband and the wife are magi,

especially if they specialize in different magicks and yet work well together. The couple's opponents will probably expend their efforts against one partner or the other, even while they're dealing with both....

Roger Bolingbroke: The Court Magus

Although the true nature of magick and its wielders is kept, for the most part, secret, the *existence* of magick is common knowledge. Whatever powers and advantages mundane folk think it grants, they assume that it's worth possessing. No matter how often the priests and philosophers condemn the Black Arts, some merchants and courtiers consider magick just another resource. Thus, rulers and merchants who can afford high fees often hire Awakened "servants" — healers, artisans, alchemists, seers, scryers, even all-out battlefield sorcerers.

Unfortunately (perhaps), many a Court Magus is actually a fraud, garbling out a bit of half-learned lore and claiming that much more could be achieved — given a little more gold to pay for better spell materials, of course. Such frauds annoy the truly Awakened (even if they serve as useful misdirection), but aside from petty swindling and unnecessary hysteria, the frauds don't often cause much trouble. No, it's the *genuinely* powerful Court Magicians who cause *real* complications.

To begin with, a person who becomes a "court wizard" at all, despite tacit disapproval or outright prohibition, is probably motivated either by greed or by some other warped priority. The Order of Hermes (the dominant force in European ritual magick) maintains that "court wizards" both demean the dignity of their profession, and stir up trouble for wizards in general. The Order of Reason takes a slightly more favorable stance on Daedalean courtiers — after all, a prince's hall can be a greater instrument of change than a dozen iron cannons. Still, the Conventions share some pretty strict protocols about "hiring out" to un-Enlightened leaders. The Order is trying to *prevent* chaos, not *breed* it!

And then there's the matter of power in the hands of one who cannot (or will not) control it properly. A Court Magus can imperil a whole kingdom with a botched spell or two, especially if he's just knowledgeable to be dangerous. Even if he is honest and competent, there's always a danger of backlash, too. The local lords and clergy might not take it well if word got out that Prince So-and-So has a pet wizard. And so, even if he's more or less a servant of the Crown, a wise Court Magus tries to keep a low profile and save his Arts (whatever they might be) for emergencies.

Image: Depending on the role he's chosen, the Court Magus might be flamboyantly eccentric, somber and scholarly, friendly and modest, or disconcertingly secretive. Chances are, he's not exactly a young man — rulers tend to

appreciate years of wisdom, even if a young candidate is truly the better magus. He's probably well dressed, though, and spends most of his time in seclusion.

Roleplaying Hints: See below; your personality depends on what you want out of this relationship. No matter who you serve, or why, always keep your own goals firmly in mind. That royal fop might consider *you* the pet, but you know that things are truly the other way around.

Notes: The archetypal Court Magus resembles a Hermetic wizard, even if he doesn't actually belong to their Order. (Isn't that how *all* wizards behave?) In a richly appointed Library and Sanctum (as the Background Traits), he plies his trade for his lord or lady. In many cases, he enjoys intimidating the other servants, if only to reaffirm the impression that he is not, in fact, one of them.

Alchemists are very popular at court, too; in some realms, their discipline is actually considered respectable. (Even if it isn't — Prague's infamous Black Alley is a well-known center of alchemy, but harbors a stunning mob of cutthroats, thieves, whores, devil-worshippers, puffers, frauds, and a even handful of true alchemists.) Hence, many Solificati, "Black Uncles," Cosians and independent alchemists enjoy the eager sponsorship of noble families, merchant princes and their own dominions.

Enlightened Artificers, while often present in courts, are usually considered artisans, clerics and statesmen, not "wizards." This is the natural home of the Guildsmen and Ksirafai, although very few of them practice obvious "magick." In decadent courts, Infernalists and other sinister magi run the household from behind screens of misdirection and illusion. In Muslim lands, sages, viziers and seers practice the legacies of Solomon. Far off, African and Indian kingdoms host prominent witch-doctors, magicians, shamans and holy men; many kingdoms even maintain posts for these sagacious folk, and consider them valuable members of the court. In mysterious Cathay, the Wu Lung wizards actually work at the Emperor's right hand, and command tremendous influence within his empire.

In any case, the typical Court Magus is egocentric, probably arrogant, and usually extravagant in manner, if not in power. Some are courtly and subtle, thoroughly at home at court and expecting to be treated as nobility; others seem distracted, uncouth and obsessive, relying on fierce reputations and mundane patrons to protect them from the consequences of their temperament. Wherever he might dwell, the Court Magus seems to operate outside the usual social strictures. Although he's still a courtier at heart, he seems to be a kingdom unto himself.

Romeo: The Young Romantic

The fire of youth burns hot; it's also dangerous to be around. Vigorous, intemperate, not exactly ignorant of useful skills but too inexperienced to know when *not* to use

ITEM, SECOND: MASTERS OF THE DANSE

them, this fellow (or sometimes, this young lady) might not live to learn better.

Our young hothead is probably the scion of an important noble family, and always seems to be at the front of its battles. If he takes an interest in arts or sciences, he's an argumentative champion of some school of thought; if he's religious, he's a fanatic; and if he falls in love... well, you know the story.

Image: Fine to look upon, quarrelsome to be around, this Romeo (or Juliet) shimmers with the heat of youth. In an older person, his temper would be annoying, but now it's somewhat endearing. Whatever he does, he does with abandon. No force under Heaven can stop him when his mind is made up... until, of course, he *changes* his mind again.

Roleplaying Hints: *Love, give me strength!*

Notes: If our young buck is a magus, he's probably still an apprentice; advancement in the Arts requires judgement and control. Players' characters who befriend him have a stalwart friend who's probably useful with a blade, but they might well soon decide he's more liability than asset, especially if they're obliged to keep him alive in the subtle world of court conflict!

Kate: The Tempestuous Rebel

Some people refuse to mind their station — or, if they're noble-born, they take advantage of that position to speak their minds whenever possible, and satisfy their whims accordingly. Despite the pleas of parents, rulers, even lovers, such a person rails against the status quo... usually in terms that would shame a mercenary. Can no one rid the court of this tempestuous rebel? No, that would take all the fun out of life.

Image: For some reason, the Rebel's spirit makes this character irresistibly attractive to certain people. She might be plain of face and feature, but her daring wit and stubborn temper make the firecat a lure to bold men and an inspiration to restless girls everywhere.

Roleplaying Hints: No, you will *not* be quiet, mind your manners, stay at home, or breed a legion of brats for some ungrateful husband! You were made for better things than that, and if the world disagrees, well, that world can take a flying leap up your backside and out the other end!

Notes: By their nature, magi tend to resent the status quo, especially if they're women. The Awakened spirit rarely submits to decorum. But the Rebel need not be a magus to throw off her social chains. Perhaps she's "just" a stubborn mortal. Chances are, she'll have unusual skills (medicine, extensive schooling, an agile wit, and so forth), and enough charisma to intimidate nearly everyone in sight. Although she's probably highborn, the Rebel could also be a servant of unusual influence, or a commoner whose family has enough wealth to keep her out of trouble. You

can bet she'll be at the heart of some scheme that spins way out of hand. And perhaps, in the ways of the magi, she might discover a stream that cools her fiery temperament... or the tinder that turns a hearth into a bonfire....



Laertes: The Avenging Protector

Honor, loyalty, and the urge for vengeance are powerful emotions; it's a foolish courtier who assumes that weak people have no protectors, or that all enemies can be bought off or misdirected. The Avenging Protector may be a relative, a sworn ally, or simply a gentleman motivated by high ideals of honor and justice. He probably faces adversaries head-down like an angry bull. Even so, he's not necessarily stupid; if faced with a subtle, clever opponent, he can be rather clever too.

As a Protector, this type of character must be recognized (and perhaps evaded) before a courtly plot can succeed; he's a useful (if self-willed) ally, and a formidable (but predictable) opponent. As an Avenger, who appears after the fact to tender revenge, he's a threat to those who have wronged him — and perhaps a tool to those who can manipulate him.

Image: Who is this man (or woman)? A noble kinsman? Faithful servant? Dear friend? Angry brother? His identity holds the key to his appearance and behavior. Nevertheless, all Avenging Protector types share an absolute obsession with the crime, a hatred for the offender, and the means with which to deflect or avenge the slight. Heaven help his target if he gets his way.

Roleplaying Hints: On the surface, you might well appear calm and casual; underneath, you're seething. Until this wrong has been averted or avenged, you will not — *cannot* — rest.

Notes: If an Awakened courtier takes up this role, magick becomes an additional weapon in his arsenal. The manner in which he chooses to pursue his vendetta will depend a great deal on his affiliation; a Knight of Gabriel would probably prefer direct battle, while a bitter Verbena prepares a venomous draught for his intended victim. In game terms, our friend has some method of deadly retribution close at hand; if need be, he will die before his quarry gets away.

Salstaff: The Old Reprobate

Courts are more than places of backstabbing and social climbing. Some courtiers genuinely manage to enjoy themselves — and *this* character makes a point of it. In fact, he's been enjoying himself for years, as his reputation (and waistline) illustrate.

Cheery, colorful, bawdy and loud, the Old Reprobate is fun to be around — if you like that sort of thing. Other people, not all of them sour puritans, find him more annoying. He's actually rather selfish, but only on a small scale, and he sometimes displays flashes of generosity and a lot of warmth. (Consistency is *not* one of his virtues.)

Image: Jovial in a seedy sort of way, our Reprobate enjoys his food and ale in huge amounts. He's good with tales or songs (often bawdy), and makes nearly everyone feel at home, so long as that home is a tavern, brothel or banquet hall. Perhaps he nurses a hidden sadness, but you'll very rarely see it. The old boy would rather laugh than weep any night.

Roleplaying Hints: Oh, it's true enough you've seen your share of tears, but they gained ye nothing but a sour belly and a gray beard. Drink to the health o' the world, and keep the lads and ladies happy.

Notes: The Reprobate seems to live in his corner of the tavern. He *may* be able to look after himself in a brawl, but he's usually more of a braggart than a warrior. He's unlikely to be Awakened — magick demands focus and discipline — but anything is possible; he may have a few surprises hidden away. Chances are, he has some mysterious past (possibly the Flaws: *Beholden*, *Dark Secret*, *Enemy* or *Oathbreaker*) that he flees at the bottom of a tankard. That past might catch up with him someday, leading he (and his friends) on to a new adventure. Until that day (if it comes at all), he provides comic relief, brightening up characters' lives when stories otherwise get *too* dark and challenging. Oh, he also makes a great Ally, Spy, or instructor in the fine art of Carousing.

Mercutio: The Sardonic Friend

Any court is tapestry of alliances, passions and high business. When you're trying to find the pattern in that wild design, it's often good to have a companion who's got a certain amount of distance and detachment. This Sardonic

Friend affects a jaundiced view, but he's actually more perceptive (and compassionate) than he'd ever admit to being. More of an observer than a courtier, he can watch events without becoming entrapped in them. A wise courtier keeps a Sardonic Friend nearby, if only because she finds his witty running commentary so entertaining — and useful.

Image: Urbane to an almost insufferable degree, the Sardonic One feigns boredom and contempt for everything he sees. This pose is usually an act — he's quite fascinated by the whole thing, but doesn't care to show it. When he actually gets involved in something, his apparent "disinterest" gives way to great social skill.

Roleplaying Hints: The whole human farce is absurd. Comment on this absurdity as often as possible, assuming you can do so with a modicum of wit and invention. Oh, deep down you probably harbor some secret fondness for the courtly masquerade (life would be so *tedious* otherwise!), but it would never do to actually *show* your interest. Cloak your observations in obscure metaphors, too; anyone who actually understands what you're talking about is worth calling "friend."

Notes: The Sardonic Friend *probably* has ideals of his own — bone-deep cynicism is a rare thing, even at court — and he may prove a staunch ally when matters grow serious. That, in fact, is when he may be most useful; those who form battle plans in anger need a cool-headed ally to bring them back to better judgement.

This character type makes an excellent consor, too. Magi tend to get wrapped up in personal or cosmic concerns, and a witty companion may provide a bit of essential distance. Despite his often depreciating witticisms, he's a very perceptive fellow; in game terms, the character probably boasts Awareness, Empathy, a host of social skills, and (of course) the requisite fighting ability.

Iago: The Treacherous Friend

A man may be judged by his choice in friends, but it's not always fair to do so; some "friends" hide darkness behind a pleasant facade. Especially amongst courtiers (who are often expert in deception), merchants (who judge carefully, but more by commercial dealings than by deep assessments), and soldiers (who may judge by military skill and past loyalty in battle), the false friend is all too common. Inspired by envy, greed, insults real or imagined, or some old or well-hidden loyalty, this character exploits mistaken trust to bring down the strongest and wisest folk.

A Treacherous "Friend" has a host of betrayals at his fingertips. Given the chance, he might spill a war-plan to an enemy, undermine a marriage with innuendoes, draw an honest fellow into bad company, or simply plant a literal dagger in the back at the best opportunity. The most corrosive poison in his arsenal, however, is a sweet honey of

lies; with it, he can make true friends seem false, honors seem like insults, and dedication into deception. With his oh-so-reasonable voice, he undermines confidences; pretending to be a character's "only true friend," he makes it seem as though his sins come from other parties. By the time his dupe realizes the Treacherous Friend's real purposes (if she ever does), her world is hopelessly skewed and her *real* "true friends" are long gone....

Image: Without a charming facade, the Treacherous Friend would be powerless. Hence, he appears to be loyal, trustworthy, perceptive and brave. Good looks and good fortune probably favor him. Feigned love and courtesy mask the darkness within.

Roleplaying Hints: You have been most sorely wronged, and the responsible parties will suffer epic tragedies before you're done with them. Affect a pleasant mien to cloak the poison in your words, and take your time. The best revenge can drown the world in tears.

Notes: We know what you're thinking: This guy is an Infernalist, right? Well, no, he probably isn't. And that's what's so frightening about him. True enough, he *could* be one of the Fallen; sadly, Shakespeare's Iago was no devil-worshipper, simply a man with a grudge. Such types are all too common in court, both among mortals and the Awakened. (See Lady Gianni later in this chapter.)

Naturally, our "Friend" is an expert at deception. If he's a magus, he probably has Mind spells to spare, and uses very subtle tricks to lend credibility to his lies. This Iago's worst weapon, however, is his apparent truthfulness. His lies have just enough substance to sound reasonable, and he knows how to exploit someone's insecurities. This character could be anyone, too—he doesn't wear his treachery like a flag. In game terms, he might appear as any of the other types in this section, especially the Reprobate,

Sardonic Friend, Princess, Romantic or Servant. All he needs is a motivation for his evil, and a charming exterior with which to bring it about.

Tybalt: The Deadly Rake

Honor, passion, skill with the sword — the defining features of the swash-buckling tale are epitomized by spectacular, grandiloquent figures who blaze through their world like meteors. Sadly, such men (and women) are not always heroes; the Deadly Rake, for example, embodies the swash-buckling ideal, but uses his skills for bullying and revenge. The problem is, meteors burn out, and those who live by the sword can easily die thereby. Still, a lot of skill and a little fine judgement can keep this "king of cats" alive for many a long year.

When not engaged in swordplay, the Deadly Rake amuses himself in other predictable ways. He's probably as fiery a lover as he is a fighter, and while he guards the honor of his own friends and family scrupulously enough, he's pretty careless with the good names of others. Indeed, the Rake loves *any* excuse to duel, and might go out of his way to provoke men — with blades, words, sexuality or even magick — who seem like they'd be challenging opponents.

Image: Tempestuous, sarcastic, stylish and often mean, the Rake lives to show off. To some, he's a boon companion and dedicated



friend; to others, he's a spoiled boor with more sword-skill than good sense.

Roleplaying Hints: Tolerate no insult, but leave plenty in your wake. A man is measured by his ability to stand up for himself, so make certain everyone understands that you are *the* man to be reckoned with.

Notes: Although he has a diabolical counterpart (the Rake-Hell featured in **Infernalism: The Path of Screams**), this fiery young man is more *vain* than actively *evil*. For whatever reason, the Rake is convinced that he *must* be the Alpha Male in any situation — he's gone to a lot of trouble to be the *best* at what he does, and cannot tolerate a rival. If he chooses to befriend another character, he'll make an excellent companion; the Rake is simply another aspect of the Avenging Protector, after all — he's just *really* touchy about what he defends.

Some young Guildsmen and other Awakened swordsmen fall into this category, but the Deadly Rake is usually a formidable mortal. Magi who master swordplay and seduction usually treat those skills as means to an end, while the Deadly Rake seems to regard them as ends in themselves.

Viola: The Disguised Adventuress

The Dark Fantastic world grants little freedom to its womenfolk, and those of high social rank seem, if anything, to have less liberty than those of lesser estate. On the other hand, these women may be permitted some education, and they have chances to observe more of the world at large, and to shape their own ideas and hopes. Sometimes, then, circumstances throw such women into situations where they must take action in the world. And to do what needs to be done, a few of these women disguise themselves as men.

Getting away with this sort of masquerade requires skill and quick wits, but the fashions of the age can hide a slender female figure, and the sheer audacity of the act prevents many onlookers from guessing at the truth. By the way, cross-dressing in this period is more than just a theatric convention; throughout history, a surprising number of women *have* passed as men, sometimes for years.

A Disguised Adventuress usually has a fixed goal, and will discard her disguise with a wry smile when that purpose has been achieved. Some heroines, though, grow to like their masculine freedoms, and sustain the deception indefinitely. Still, such women are likely to need friends they can trust. By definition, the Adventuress is determined and independent, a very clever (and usually loyal) ally, but a dangerous enemy.

Image: Boyish and beardless, the Adventuress seems to get a kick out of things most men take for granted. Although (s)he seems preoccupied by some distant concern, this young "lad" has a giddy, almost fey, edge to him. From time to time, this odd boy says or does inappropriate things, then

quickly tries to compensate for his mistake with some strange excuse. ("Pardon, milord, I fear such courtesies are a part of every man's training where I grew up.") When (and if) the disguise is ruined, our Heroine might react with shock, outrage, fury or hilarity. Women are such *fickle* creatures, after all....

Disguise

Fortunately for many adventurers, the elaborate fashions of the day make disguise a fairly effective (if complicated) art. Dressing as a member of the opposite sex is easy in layered clothing, wigs and make-up. Naturally, you'll still need enough skill to actually pass for someone else; this is easy enough to do if you're sticking within your own class and gender, but gets harder if you try to pass above your station.

In game terms, the Skill: *Disguise* is important, but not essential unless the character is trying to look really different. She might, however, need *Etiquette* (which encompasses current fashions) and possibly *Culture* (in foreign lands), to get away with courtly garb. Depending on the disguise and circumstances, the Storyteller might base the Dice Pool on the character's *lowest* appropriate Ability when she's playing above her station; she could fabricate a convincing deception, but find herself unable to master the correct poise and mannerisms!

In this age, cross-dressing often works. A person attired as a man will be assumed to be precisely that, in every detail, unless "he" acts inappropriately. Women's clothing actually augments disguises by suggesting something that might not be there at all! Of course, it's always easier to carry off a disguise if you've got a slim figure and a fairly smooth complexion — voluptuous women and burly men will have far more difficulty. Full, stiff tunics or bodices, worn over shirts, stomachers or similar layered garb, can conceal a certain amount about the wearer's shape, but they can't cover everything. Male costume shows off the shape of the legs, and a cross-dressed woman may be considered a weak, if graceful, fellow. And upper-class women, although *their* legs are hidden beneath full skirts, have been trained to move in an emphatically feminine manner that few men can emulate easily. Thus, a cross-dressing swashbuckler had better watch what s/he says and does. In court, everyone is *always* watching!

ITEM, SECOND: MASTERS OF THE DANSE

Roleplaying Hints: You must've been *mad* to think this would work! And yet... it did. Or it has... so far... hmmm... Watch the men around you, and take your cues from what they do. It seems easy enough... well, except for... and... well, it's an improvement, anyway. Oh, it's true enough this new "dress" of yours has complicated things immensely. It carries a bit of trouble with it, too. But then again, life is far more exciting these days, so why argue?

Notes: Dressing as a man is a pretty common gambit among independent women in the Dark Fantastic world. Although magical sects aren't *usually* as prejudiced as mortal ones (there are grave exceptions, of course), a man simply receives more respect than a woman in almost any culture.

Naturally, magick makes cross-dressing far easier; a touch of Mind or Life magick can enhance a disguise in ways that few un-Awakened women could hope to match. Actually *changing* your sex requires Life 3, but Life 2 can deepen your voice or adjust your gait. Similarly, a simple Mind 2 shrug can reinforce the illusion, although a magus would need Mind 3 to actually *hide* her sex from a determined search. Among their own kind, magi rarely bother trying to hide their sexes — magick makes it too easy to penetrate such a disguise; even so, some female magi occasionally *do* disguise their genders, if only for a while.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek: The Comical Fop

Even the sternest social conservatives, who hold that inherited rank reflects divine providence, have to admit that some of those who inherit rank are not exactly perfect ornaments to their titles. In short, some courtiers with wealth and old, impressive names prove to be... well, *idiots*.

Fortunately, such souls can be very entertaining. Draped in absurd amounts of tacky finery, spouting ostentatious gibberish, flaunting ridiculous decorums, and generally making himself look stupid, the Fop evokes laughter from courtiers and commoners alike. Somehow, he never seems to notice; if he does, he merely uses the ridicule as an excuse to be that much more inane.

Granted, the Comical Fop is not always as stupid as he appears; a true idiot doesn't often attain a noble rank — or keep it long. Then again, he might just be obscenely lucky, or have trusty servants who tend to the details. When the opportunity presents itself, however, he can be quite amusing. God help him (or his prey) when he falls in love!

Image: Existing far past the cutting edge of fashion, our Fop favors either obnoxiously ornate medieval finery, or absurdly "innovative" garments that seem to have been designed by mad Italian clowns. Chances are, he's slathered himself with perfumes, cosmetics and a choking smear of disdain. His manner is as offensive as his clothing; just *listening* to him could drive a person to violence! If he

weren't so rich and powerful, the Fop would probably be the village idiot instead. Pity.

Roleplaying Hints: Let them laugh. You're a true visionary who sees what others cannot fathom.

Notes: In story terms, the Fop often serves to lighten the mood of a serious tale — usually by providing other characters with a target for pranks. Occasionally, he takes on a more serious cast, especially if he wields life-and-death power over his subordinates. In really tragic stories, he might even symbolize upper-class hubris by using his wealth and power toward some trivial end, falling under the sway of charismatic evil, or leading an immaculate army into disaster. In general, though, he's best used for laughs. The Comical Fop rarely wields supernatural powers, except in the most comical of sagas. He may, however, take a gullible interest in magick, and perform myriad humorous acts of foolishness to satisfy his curiosity.



Friar Laurence: The Worldly Priest

Rich folk and courts have their priests; this is, after all, still an age of faith. Some priests are quietly devout, praying for hours in their chapels and avoiding the intrigues of the day. Others, however, seem more interested in secular affairs. Some of these "worldly priests" are unattractive, cynical representatives of their religions; others, though, are genuinely devout. Reaching beyond their clerical duties and roles, these priests and monks (or occasionally, nuns) tend their flocks with a fairly active hand.

The Worldly Priest may act as an advisor, confessor, confidante or scholar. He might even possess some odd skills that he's learned in his holy service (like alchemy, medicine, academics or supernatural lore). Chances are, the Priest had a secular career before he took his vows;

perhaps he was born into a merchant family, a roving troupe, a thieves' den, or even a throne. Either way, he understands people frighteningly well, and has access to resources that few people — even nobles — could hope to attain. Still, he is sworn to sacred vows, and while he might take a few “liberties” with them, there are certain limits upon his behavior.

Image: Although his robes of office tend to overshadow his personality, this man (or woman) of God has quick, attentive eyes. He might seem almost saintly, trustworthy and devout; or he could appear to be a distant, sanctimonious bastard. Note, of course, that appearances can deceive, even behind a cleric's vestments. An aloof cleric might hide a compassionate heart, while a backstabber could cloak his ambitions behind a smiling face.

Roleplaying Hints: Are you devout enough to do what must be done? It may involve breaking a few rules — possibly even violating your pledges. Is this task worth it? Most certainly. Although men might not approve of what you're doing, you're quite certain that God will.

Notes: Whole sects (notably the Chorus, Gabrielites and Craftsmasons) seem to be peopled with worldly clerics. Yet the strongest folk of this kind may be un-Awakened mortals who nevertheless possess enough True Faith, cunning, or connections to be quite powerful, indeed. A clergyman, after all, has access to extensive documents and money, the goodwill of his parishioners, and the power to save or damn a soul. Worthwhile examples of this type include any Pope, Cesare Borgia (who is, technically, a priest), or the brilliant and formidable Cardinal Richelieu.

Nurse: The Wise Servant

Great and powerful people wouldn't be able to achieve much if they didn't employ servants. And while the rich nobles and merchants usually get the lion's share of attention, their servants often have most of the useful skills. Every household needs its servants to keep things going; ever-present yet ignored, these “helping hands” carry far more influence than their station would suggest.

The Wise Servant sees what's going on far more acutely than her noble employers do. When you need help or confidences of a personal nature, she'll be there, often against her better judgement. In all probability, she'll be smuggling paramours past your parents, delivering letters to your unruly friends, tendering her advice on subjects of the heart or state, and offering a crying shoulder when one is required. Loyal as she may be, she's not stupid. If a plan or assignation seems like a bad idea, she'll be the first to tell

you so. And if you need to be “betrayed” for your own good, this character might just be the one to do it.

Image: Older, often single or widowed, this character dotes on her “employers” as if they were family. (For all intents and purposes, they are.) Although she's probably a nurse or tutor, (s)he could be a butler, stable-hand, cook or bodyguard. In any case, she's very perceptive, often earthy, and unafraid to speak her mind.

Roleplaying Hints: Even kings and queens need parental care. Sadly, the parents never seem to give their offspring more than cursory consideration. Thus, it falls to you to provide the helping hand (and heart) your masters lack.

Notes: Traditionally, such figures tend to be old family retainers, as familiar as one's own face in the mirror (although a newcomer, up from the country and eager to be useful, can be just as good to have around). Most magi have helpful servants (“gros” or “consors”) nearby, and all Daedalean lodges include brethren who help with mundane (and not-so-mundane) chores. If a magus is smart, he'll treat a Wise Servant well. An angry underling can be a very dangerous foe.

Although servant characters rarely wield magical powers (those who Awaken or otherwise better themselves tend to move up the social ladder), some possess unusual talents like True Faith, Awareness, Hearth Wisdom, Hands of Daedalus, or other Merits. In certain cases, though, a “servant” magus or artisan might have reasons to hide her talents — revenge, love, fear, and so forth.

Stephano: The Comical Servant

To be sure, wealth, education and a good name do not ensure grace. Neither, however, do poverty, ignorance or obscurity. While the Wise Servant is a boon to her masters, a truly Comical one is, at best, a good foil. The best that can be said about him is that he makes his employers look good by comparison.

In plot terms, the Comical Servant is often a well-intentioned blunderer, or a not-so-well-intentioned meddler. He's probably got some useful skills, but a perverse lack of wit or fortune makes him look... well, foolish. This does not, of course, mean he's worthless; indeed, he could be a strong (but drunken) warrior, a clever (but lecherous) seneschal, a loyal (but clumsy) squire, or some other combination of value and incompetence. In serious moments, the Comical Servant provides a test for a highborn character's morality: If and when the bumbler makes one mess too many, will his master take the trouble to save him?

Image: Although each servant is distinct, this character often bears some sign of his humorous nature — a horsy face, preening vanity, clumsiness, etc. (See “Comical Drama” in Item, Fourth.) Even so, our Servant doesn’t have to look like an idiot; indeed, he might be quite fair to look upon — until he screws something up, that is.

Roleplaying Hints: There’s a fine distinction between humor and abject stupidity. You don’t try to act like an idiot — things just happen to go wrong when you’re around!

Notes: The Comical Servant is even less likely to be Awakened than the Comical Fop; if he ever *does* gain access to supernatural power, the ensuing plot will probably focus on saving him (and the world at large) from what he does with it. Still, a supposed buffoon who suddenly displays, say, Animal Speech or True Faith could put a nice twist on a common stereotype.

In less-than-totally-horrific chronicles, a dark lord or vampire may be attended by Comical Servants; the lord can still be seriously deadly, but the servant provides occasional relief from the darkness of his deeds. Naturally, such relationships raise some interesting questions: Why would an evil master tolerate such incompetence? Is it old family loyalty, bad luck, or the one “flaw” (love, compassion, etc.) in that otherwise perfectly vile nature?

Trinculo: The Court Fool

Kings and princes need relief from the weight of the crown — and sometimes require someone who can speak truths that other courtiers dare not utter. Such is the role of the Court Fool, the “wise madman” who (deliberately or otherwise) wallows in absurdity. Some such characters are, by later standards, mentally unstable or seriously disturbed — this is a harsh age, and there’s no shame in laughing at someone else’s affliction. Other Fools are true professional comedians, witty, shrewd, and often trained in skills like juggling or acrobatics.

The intelligent Court Fool may provide comic relief; or he might keep up a running commentary about people and events. He could be a useful contact, too — few other courtiers spend so much time in the presence of royalty. Although he might seem dim, the Court Fool probably understands what’s going on a *lot* better than other people assume; after all, his job is often based on careful observation. And of course, those entertainment skills may have all sorts of unexpected uses. (See Edgar Allen Poe’s story “Hop-Frog” for a nasty example of just how far such skills might take one....)

Image: Traditionally, Fools are deformed in some way; dwarfs, hunchbacks, microcephalics and hermaphrodites are common fixtures in most courts. Depending on the time and nation, a Fool might simply be a person of another race. Still, some rulers appreciate beauty rather than ugliness; a refined, artistic lord might have an extraordinarily attractive Fool — perhaps one whose physical perfections are offset by some striking malformation of mind or body. Regardless of his appearance, the Court Fool often boasts very bright, contrasting clothing, bells or baubles, and some witticism or “stunt” (juggling, firebreathing, epileptic fits) that sets him apart from other, “lesser” fools.

Roleplaying Hints: They laugh at you, but you laugh back. Oh, the crowns ride high enough on *their* heads, but you enjoy a freedom of observation (and revenge) that few courtiers could brag of! Use that freedom to your advantage, and when you see an opportunity to improve your lot, take it.

Notes: An Awakened Court Fool makes for an unlikely but interesting character. How better might a clever Seer of Chronos sit and observe a court while making occasional cryptic prophecies? Or what better role could there be for a Ksirafai spy with the right skills? Alternatively, a mentally unbalanced Fool who Awakens as a Marauder might make for a brief, horrific plot; given the right sort of madness, he could remain in place unnoticed for years, warping the governance of the realm and possibly even spreading his insanity.



Of Some Important Figures

Riches are for spending, and spending for honor and good actions.

— Francis Bacon, *Essays: Of Expense*

The Awakened Ones wander all through the courts and counting-houses of the world. Even so, few of them run around displaying their powers to all and sundry; rather, they usually prefer subtle influence to overt witchcraft. For witchcraft, of course, is punishable by death or exile, and few courtiers want to (or could afford to) attract such unpleasant attention.

The wizardly courts of Horizon, Doissetep and the White Towers are filled with more “celebrities” than we could possibly describe in this book. Many of them, however, can be found in the **Castles and Covenants** supplement, or in other **Sorcerers Crusade** books. Among the mortal courts, magi play quieter games, and are far less obvious for who they are. All the same, certain personages make impressions whether they want to or not. Some of those worthies can be found below, while mortal courtiers and rulers who dominate the era, like Cesare Borgia or Queen Elizabeth, are detailed in **The Sorcerers Crusade Companion**, pp. 178-192. Remember, of course, that these fine folk are characters of renown. They might not be walking fireball machines, but they command all manner of influence — often in very unpredictable places. Some act every inch the haughty courtier while others remain silent. Any one of them, however, could be a frightful adversary... or a valuable friend.

Mother Aphra von Freiburg (1391-1497)

Those who visit her convent at Freiburg realize that Mother Aphra is not, perhaps, the most devout of nuns. She spends a great deal of time in her carefully-maintained rose garden, taking pensive pleasure in the blooms there, and the ideas she discusses in her extensive correspondence with churchmen and scholars are not always entirely... conventional. What very few people realize is that this quietly brilliant nun wields considerable power over the politics of Western Europe — both in mundane courts and Enlightened affairs.

Born Jutta Broten, the daughter of a noble *freiherr*'s (“baron's”) servant, she was always moderately familiar with high society. Although not “comely” by most

standards, the girl had a fierce intellect and irrepressible charm. Whatever she did, young Jutta made a point of examining each element of the task at hand; if there was someone nearby who could teach her more about it, the girl would study *anything* — stable-craft, leatherwork, etiquette, politics. A lesser child might have annoyed the *freiherr* and his servants with her endless questions, but Jutta's raw charm and ready mind made her a favorite around the manor... and brought her to the attention of a nameless Ksirafai Magistrate.

Awakened and inducted into the Razors, Jutta proved a useful agent. Soon, she assumed a double identity: Jutta Broten the *freiherr*'s favored servant, and Frau Gretta Vargr, Ksirafai operative within the German states. But despite her skills with disguise and misdirection, Gretta Vargr's remarkable intellectual abilities often drew unwanted attention. Eventually, she and her patron agreed that she should enter a convent. This compromise was not as strange as it may seem — a good convent, governed by friends and allies of the Ksirafai, gave her a fine venue for her inquisitive mind. Fake deaths were staged for both Gretta the Wolf and Jutta the servant. Soon, “Sister Aphra” found far more freedom in her own thoughts than she would have enjoyed outside the convent walls.

With very little assistance, Sister Aphra soon rose to the position of Mother Superior. Between her early years at the *freiherr*'s manor, her allies within and without the Order of Reason, and her holy office, the “sister” acquired the political savvy of a seasoned courtier. Over the next several decades, she established a modest but widespread reputation among scholars, churchmen and magi alike... to say nothing of a formidable network of friendships, contacts and spies. These days, Mother Aphra is a leading ideologue and patron of the Order. A real reverence for God and all His creations lends fire to her convictions, and that conviction makes her a powerful force for mercy, reverence and Reason.

As the Council of Nine and the Order of Reason clash, Mother Aphra finds herself in a difficult situation. To her, the Conventions hold the key to a better world, and she believes completely in their cause. All the same, she's got friends among the Choeur Céleste, and prefers to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. (Her friends, it's worth noting, know nothing about her affiliation with the Order, much less with its Razors.) When she must, however, Mother Aphra can still call upon her days as Gretta the Wolf; at such times, she becomes a most efficient spymistress, a Magistrate within her secret Convention.

Although she's quite old by the time most **Sorcerers Crusade** adventures begin, Mother Aphra remains an embodiment of the Ksirafai philosophy: *be sharp and quick; cut only what you must, and do so quickly*. Soft-spoken and kindly, she retains the quick wits of the child she once was. Ruthless as she can be when pressed, the mother makes friends very easily; to her, politics is a simple matter of saying the correct thing at the correct moment. Despite her rank in an Enlightened fellowship, Mother Aphra would be appalled to be considered a "witch." To her, God's gifts are only the fruits of a restless mind, and if she displays some uncommon skills, well, my dear, she certainly worked hard enough to *earn* them!

Caesario the Fool (1461-?)

An irresistibly gorgeous Moor, Caesario lives by his talents — all kinds of talents. By trade, he's an actor in the *commedia del 'arte*, a traveling improvisationalist with a razor wit and an acrobat's agility. By preference, he's a rogue, stealing romance, trinkets and new magickal secrets from everyone he meets. By necessity, he can fight well, both with magick and with blades, and he knows many different ways to escape bad situations.

Born in a small village outside Castile, Caesario suffered an unkind childhood. According to gossip, a Moor raped his unmarried mother during one of the many flame-ups between Muslims and Catholics in that region. Cast out for her pregnancy, Susanna Cappella raised her only son alone, working as a washerwoman, nanny and prostitute. As he grew, the beautiful child became an impossibly handsome young man. Girls flocked to him, and other boys beat him senseless almost every day. The hard lessons of those years left Caesario with a fickle adoration for women and a near-total disregard for everyone but himself.

When a troupe of traveling players visited his village, young Caesario was captivated. When they left, he went with them. Over the next several years, he winds up bouncing from troupe to troupe, respected for his fine features and quick wit, but disliked for his carnal selfishness. Fortunately, this wandering Fool discovers some new talents along the way — the mystick Arts of mind and body. Armed with those Arts, good bladesmanship, fine features and charm, he now moves through the fringes of courts across Christendom. Although he very rarely chooses sides in a dispute, he'll gladly join one, assuming that there are coins, women, and good times to be had if he does.

A flamboyant, amoral soul, Caesario embodies the carnal spirit of the era. Handsome as a Michelangelo sculpture, dark as fine mahogany, graceful as a cat and friendly as a drunken politician, this wandering player seduces women for fun, then leaves them behind as his wagon departs. He gambles freely, plays constantly, and dares his long-suffering acquaintances to keep up with him. Dressed in colorful Italian hose, doublet and boots, he keeps a player's mask close at hand, but prefers to use his real face for... personal business. An accomplished swordsman, acrobat, dancer and swindler, Caesario lives up to the large codpiece he wears so proudly.

What makes this bastard a hero? Well, in many ways, he isn't — he's a charming rake. Caesario's saving grace is that he's not actually *malicious*, simply selfish. He does occasionally aspire to something better than his wastrel's ways, and sometimes performs good deeds. For the most part, however, the man's a vagabond — a dazzling, talented villain, but a villain nonetheless.

Maximus Wolfgang von Reismann (941?-1885...?)

Sometimes known as "The Founder of Two Conventions," Wolfgang von Reismann laughs that description away, pointing out that he merely helped muster the Craftsmasons when they were scattered across Europe. He can afford a little honest modesty; von Reismann is probably the single most important figure in the history of the Order of Reason.

Heir to a noble German family, von Reismann was a wealthy and clever man, a scholar expert in both abstruse mathematics and practical, fiery rhetoric. He was also taught many sacred Arts by an uncle who had some knowledge of the ancient lore of the Brotherhood of the Rule, a secret society that controlled arcane secrets of engineering in Ancient Rome. Poring over the Brotherhood's lore, von Reismann thought himself (perhaps correctly) to be its last representative in the Holy Roman Empire. He was never a pure idealist, though; he always had a taste for fame and glory, which grew into a lust for literal immortality. Soon, he realized that the engineering and mathematics of the Craftsmasons could not meet that wish; to defy old age, he needed new alliances.

He never found much to interest him — or even accept — in religion. In his youth, Wolfgang was a free-thinker with a distinct lack of good judgement. Soon, his research into alchemy earned him a reputation as a sorcerer. A series of personal and "professional" missteps cost him his inheritance, his title, and nearly his life. On the run from both the Church and a handful of angry magi, he disappeared into seclusion for several years.

Eventually, von Reismann emerged rejuvenated with his appearance strangely... changed. Soon afterward, he set out to resurrect old ideals, mustering the Gathering of the Square in Frankfurt in 997 and thus inspiring the creation of the Craftmasons. Wolfgang's alchemical research also brought him into contact with groups that would form parts of the Solificati and Cosians around 1010. Their more sophisticated alchemy eventually completed the processes he had begun; now ageless, von Reismann withdrew to supervise the new group from secret.

For decades, von Reismann all but vanished; behind a series of allies and fronts, however, he was working to expand his followers' influence in the mundane world. In the 13th century, he and other Craftmasons supported a growing alliance between mercantile port-towns in northern Germany and around the Baltic. Within a few years, this "Hanseatic League" became a power to be reckoned with, strong enough to fight wars against monarchs who challenged it. Eventually, however, larger nation-states proved stronger than the League; by the 15th century, it's a shadow of its former self.

Meanwhile, von Reismann's ally Stephen Trevanus suggested merging sacred geometry and trade. Opportunistic as ever, von Reismann saw the full potential of this idea; adding his old flair for classical rhetoric to the mixture, he founded many precepts governing the formal study of *Ars Cupiditae* (see Item, Third). Trade, he declared (over Trevanus's growing uncertainty), was the key to the triumph of Reason. As the decline of the Hanseatic League showed, however, trade alone was not enough — Daedaleans would have to build influence elsewhere, using their Arts and wealth. The Craftmasons would retain their honored place in the Order, but the power of commerce (and the control of desire) lay beyond their normal studies. The idea demanded a new League made up of merchant-princes from around the known world. Thus, Von Reismann's vision laid the foundation for the High Guild, officially formed during the Convention of the White Tower in 1325.

By the 15th century, von Reismann has retreated to "retirement" at the White Tower of Languedoc. Some Daedaleans believe that he has retired from strenuous trade and politics; he certainly stands aloof from day-to-day affairs. This, however, is a pose. In many ways, von Reismann at the peak of his powers, and his shrewd intellect and vast experience are still hard at work. He spends most of his time studying reports concerning trade across the known world. Occasionally, he issues brief, subtle orders — with impressive results. Directly and indirectly, he commands almost unlimited wealth; that gold, however, is no longer very important to him. It is the *idea* of value that intrigues him

now. With dizzying mathematics and endless political "experiments," von Reismann has begun to study the effects of early economics, psychology and social engineering.

Around the end of the 1400s, von Reismann sets the seal on the ascendancy of trade in the Renaissance world... and beyond. Adopting the guise of a capable merchant-banker of moderate wealth, and claiming descent from a "famous ancestor" to explain his name, he allies with the Fuggers, a banking house which bankrolls the Holy Roman Empire — and, at times, many other European monarchs. Eventually, von Reismann's ally and pupil Jacob Fugger II finances the election of Charles V to the imperial throne, while pressurizing the Papacy to moderate its ban on usury. Thus does von Reismann establish that money, not religion, is the supreme power in the mundane world.

Despite his wealth and wisdom, von Reismann is not entirely carefree. In the rational, ordered world that Wolfgang has worked so long to establish, 400-year-old men cannot exist. Decade after decade, he must renew his alchemical longevity; each time, the research becomes more esoteric and the preparations become more bizarre. Eventually, he retreats into near-total seclusion and devotes his remaining time to obsessive research and ruthless politics. Dogged by the Scourge/Paradox, von Reismann nevertheless becomes the Order of Reason's "grand old man," approving all major policy decisions — including the destruction of the Craftmasons he once led. Although later sources will indicate that von Reismann finally "dies" in 1885, his "descendent," Jacob, joins the 20th-century Technocracy. During his rapid rise to power, many Technocrats will whisper that the Progenitors — who inherited allegiances from von Reismann's Cosian allies — have finally made good on an old promise. Grown from Wolfgang's own flesh, it seems, a new von Reismann continues to oversee the cause of Reason.

(Incidentally, only a superstitionist would comment that von Reismann's death and recreation symbolically reflect the decline of the Order of Reason and its reemergence as the Technocracy. Technocrats do not believe in sympathetic magick.)

Lucas Pacioli (1445-1514)

Born in the Italian town of Sansepolcro, Pacioli grows up knowing Piero della Francesca, another citizen of the same town and a noted artist and expert on perspective. This connection assists the scholarly Pacioli in finding a place in the household of Frederico, Count of Urbino. He also spends time in Venice as tutor to the sons of a rich merchant, and acquires fame as a mathematician before

traveling to Rome to stay in the house of the artist-philosopher-musician Alberti. Eventually, he takes vows in the Franciscan order, but this only occasionally interferes with his travels and studies. In time, Lucas rises through the order, later spending time in charge of a monastery and obtaining a special Papal dispensation that allows him to hold personal property (a rather unusual privilege for a Franciscan monk).

Pacioli's *Summa*, written in 1494, is nominally a tool to improve mathematical education; later, however, it will be remembered as the first clear explication of a system of accounting that has been spreading gradually through the trading-houses of Italy over the last century: double-entry bookkeeping. Pacioli then travels to Milan to teach mathematics at the court of Duke Ludovico Maria Sforza; there, he meets Leonardo da Vinci, who provides illustrations for Pacioli's *De Divina Proportione* before they both flee the city to escape invading French armies. It might be that Luca introduces his friend Leo to the monk's patrons in the High Guild; or perhaps da Vinci provides an audience for Luca in the halls of the Order of Reason. In either case, the two men achieve some degree of fame among the Daedaleans, even if neither one actually *joins* the confederation.

Although he's not a "magus" in the conventional sense, Luca is almost certainly Enlightened by a powerful Daemon's inspiration. A rationalist at heart, Pacioli represents a balanced, mathematical sort of scholarship that refutes "magick" but ties mundane principles to grand aspects of God's Creation. His studies of proportion and perspective are symbolic of the relationship between man and his environment. His texts, which use Arabic numerals rather than the traditional, cumbersome Roman system, link commercial procedures to Pythagorean harmonies and the "music of the spheres," and thus show the world that business can be proportionate and harmonious.

As future Grand Financiers will remark to one another as they review Pacioli's history, there are more glamorous services to the High Guild than popularizing double-entry bookkeeping; few, however, could be quite as important in the long run.

Tatrianna D'or (1453-??)

A daring, shadowy and not always welcome figure in France's courts, Mistress Tatrianna D'or defies all the laws that supposedly govern women. She shamelessly dresses like a man, but wears her femininity plainly enough. She does not wait for men to court her, but prefers to instigate

flirtations on her own. When she does so, Tatrianna forgoes the polite rituals of "conventional" discourse and behaves more like a man than either a lady or a whore. Her slender sword shines almost as brightly as her laughter, but it's got a deeper bite. (Many gentlemen have tried to humble her with wits or blades, but they very seldom succeed.) Why is she allowed to behave this way? Three reasons, really: Tatrianna is cunning and beautiful; she has powerful friends, relatives and lovers; and she's an accomplished Daedean courtier. No matter what she does, people just seem to shrug and say "*La Demoiselle est comme ça*," ("The Lady is like that"). And in the same vein, nothing really ever seems to bother *her*, either.

Born Marie Betonne, this daughter of a wealthy Norman family resisted marriage from an early age. There were reasons for this: Marie claimed she'd had visions of a bloody death in a husband's bed. The death she foresaw befell another woman, fortunately — Marie's elder sister. A murderous nobleman named Le Marque hacked his five brides to bits, then sunk the pieces in his moat. Although no proof remained to betray his deed, Marie saw through Le Marque's excuses and discovered her sister's fate. Although she was but 13, Marie stole a sword and dagger and, by a fantastic stroke of fortune, not only killed the nobleman, but exposed her sister's murder, too. Another lucky break granted Le Marque's lands and possession to the Betonne family as blood-settlement, while Marie gained a new and secret compensation: Awakening.



Always an extremely lucky girl, Marie soon learned to control her talents. In short order, she mastered the Arts of Fate and Fortune, and used fabulous "coincidences" to enrich herself and learn several trades, like swordcraft and writing, that were often restricted to men. In the process, Marie thoroughly scandalized her family. Instead of gratitude for their new fortune, the Betonnes disowned their daughter and seized her riches, too. Once again, however, luck was on her side. Changing her name to Tatrianna D'or, Marie attracted several influential allies. One, a Rose Guild Magistrate, saw the girl's potential. By Tatrianna's 18th birthday, her family was ruined, her estate was restored under her new name, and her formal training in *Ars Cupiditae* had begun.

Over the last few years, this brazen young woman has achieved a fabulous notoriety. Eternally unmarried (but frequently "engaged"), this agent of fortune has charmed her way into (and fought her way out of) dozens of courtly intrigues. True, Tatrianna remains rather controversial; her behavior is beyond the pale, but somehow she always manages to get away with it. Outside Paris, Mademoiselle D'or keeps a lavish (if covert) villa that has become a stronghold of the Parisian Rose Guild. Oh, this *Maison de la Rose* has a rather... earthy... reputation, true enough, but it's no bordello. Its mistress is every inch a free woman, and any man who forgets himself on the premises is soon reminded of his error — at swordpoint. Gender notwithstanding, Tatrianna is considered one of the finest duelists in France. Although many indignant rivals complain "*Elle est juste chanceuse*," ("She's just lucky"), perhaps "*La chance est avec elle*" ("Luck is with her") would be more appropriate. Either way, Tatrianna's "luck" guides, protects and shapes her for many a fortunate year to come.

Benvolio Maracinni, "The Black Lion" (1446-15??)

While it's often said that a great bladesman "was born with a sword in his hand," the saying is almost literally true of Benvolio Maracinni. His father, Antonio, was the finest sword-maker in Milan, and had studied advanced techniques and designs in Damascus and Toledo before opening his own shop near the court of Prince de Nicola. Before Benvolio's birth, his father crafted an exquisite miniature sword for the child's christening. Later, when the priest pronounced the blessing on his infant son, Antonio held the tiny blade near Benvolio's hand. The baby grasped the sword around the hilt; in many ways, he hasn't let go since.

As he grew to manhood, young Benvolio excelled at swordsmanship. Although trained in his father's smithy, the boy preferred using blades to forging them. Although he got into his fair share of fights (and accumulated a number of prominent scars), Benvolio always managed to avoid serious trouble, thanks to his father's connections and perpetual indulgence. Fortunately, the boy didn't actually kill anyone until a Florentine attempted to rob Antonio's shop. What might have been murder became heroism, and the young man found himself in the Prince's favor. Tutored by some of the best swordsmen in Europe, Benvolio soon became de Nicola's champion. He was also Enlightened to the greater potential of his skills.

When young Benvolio achieved his fame, fencing was more theory than practice. Men with a grudge simply hauled out broadswords or daggers to settle the matter. Benvolio, however, saw greater promise in slender blades and fine swordplay. Armed with his father's knowledge, his tutors' training, and an almost supernatural insight, Benvolio began to refine, master, then teach the fencing arts. In the process, he also crafted some of the first true rapiers and dueling sabers.

Benvolio's talents and growing reputation soon brought him to the attention of the Rose Guild. In short order, he's become one of the High Guild's most prominent (and formidable) agents in Italy. A squat, brutal-looking man with a mane of thick, black hair, Benvolio has been dubbed "the Black Lion of Milan." Although his brilliance, swordsmanship and political savvy have earned the Black Lion several invitations to join the Inner Circle, he always politely declines, "lest my skills and wits grow rusty from disuse." Very possibly the best swordsman in Italy (if not Europe), Benvolio has recently authored a fencing treatise entitled *Concerning the Diverse Uses of the Gentleman's Blade and the Accoutrements Thereof, in Accord With Knowledge and Training of the Most Beneficial Kind*. In later years, masters like Agrippa and Marozzo will credit this *Gentleman's Blade* as an influence upon their own studies. In the meantime, Benvolio the Black Lion continues to hone his skills as only a Daedalean fencing-master can.

Lady Carla Gianni (1417-??)

Betrayal wrapped in an innocent package; Lady Carla appears to be one of the Council's most fervent supporters, a tireless diplomat with a charming smile and impeccable manners. All the while, she actually works hard to undermine the whole fellowship, spreading gossip, seducing magi,

Niccoló Machiavelli

*I laugh, and my laughter is not within me;
I burn, and the burning is not seen outside.*

— Machiavelli

As (supposedly) the embodiment of Italian Renaissance deviousness, Niccoló Machiavelli has become more of a myth than a historical figure. The man himself is a bit more complex, if not quite so formidable.

Born in 1469 in Florence, the son of an impoverished lawyer from a noted family, Machiavelli enjoys a rather patchy education; if nothing else, this encourages him to think for himself. By adulthood, he becomes a man of letters (and a very skilled writer) with an interest in public affairs within the Florentine Republic; in 1498, he acquires a fairly important post in its civil service. Sent on diplomatic missions to other states as far away as France, he develops a talent for assessing a country from a few days of observation, then summarizing what he sees. He is not, however, terribly successful as a diplomat.

A patriotic Florentine, Machiavelli displays a fondness for the Italian States that borders on the fanatical. Contrary to later legends, Niccoló is a very moral man — he simply recognizes that conventional morality and the needs of the state (and thus, of those who govern it) are rarely compatible. If nothing else, he's a practical man who favors the "best" solution allowed by circumstances. To Machiavelli, Italy's over-reliance on foreign mercenaries puts his homeland at a distinct disadvantage. (Later events prove him right.) In the spirit of independence and internal strength, he argues that Florence needs a citizen militia. In 1505, he obtains permission to create one. Unfortunately, the militia isn't particularly successful, and Machiavelli (who insists on leading it in battle) is no great general.

In 1512, the Florentine Republic collapses and the Medicis regain control. They promptly remove Machiavelli from office, and he's accused of plotting against them the following year. Despite imprisonment and torture, he denies the charges and is finally released. Retiring to his family's farm, Niccoló settles down to writing, hoping to convince the new rulers of his merits. Along with several plays and other books, he produces his masterpiece, *Il Principe* ("The Prince") during this period.

To Machiavelli, Italy's fragmentation is its undoing. Thus, he reasons, his homeland needs a strong leader — a great prince. In his treatise, Niccoló chooses the powerful, sinister Cesare Borgia as his ideal; despite the man's many flaws, this "prince of Rome" had been well educated, charismatic, and utterly ruthless when it came to affairs of the state. Although Machiavelli affects a coldly cynical pose in *Il Principe*, he also chastises would-be rulers who practice cruelty and self-indulgence. Tyranny, he maintains, is not the same as firm governance, and a tyrant is as worthy of destruction as a coward.

Worthy as *The Prince* may be, the Medicis never acknowledge Machiavelli's talents. Rather, Florence's new rulers use the esteemed courtier as an errand boy. When the Republic is restored shortly afterward, Niccoló finds himself on the wrong side of politics once again. When he dies in 1527, the great Machiavelli is (by the standards of his class, at least) quite poor.

In sum, Machiavelli proves a better theoretician than a politician. His ideas make him infamous after his death. By the more openly cynical 20th century, he will have gathered a fair amount of admirers, although some will say that he wasn't nearly in life as clever as he appears on paper. Even so, he occupies a prominent place in the history of political science, and perhaps invents the idea that history moves in cycles. This leaves one question: In the Dark Fantastic world, is he Enlightened?

In truth, probably not. An Enlightened magus who operates as openly as Machiavelli does would probably be more successful in his career (unless, of course, he's playing a very deep game). However, Machiavelli's analytical intelligence, and his basic theory that human nature is a constant that other elements can be applied to, appeals to adepts of *Ars Cupiditae*. Although Niccoló supposedly dies in the 1500s, Daedaleans of all types will read *The Prince* for centuries to come.

slandering her associates and performing the occasional assassination. Is she an agent of Satan, or a Daedalean spy? A Church infiltrator, perhaps, or a firebrand revolutionary? None of the above. Lady Carla is simply opposed to the idea of mingled cultures, of people coming together to "bastardize" their Arts and water down the magickal supremacy that her Hermetic forebears have worked so hard to achieve.

Unlike many sorcerers, Lady Carla was raised with magick. Her father, Magister Augustus Saxeus Gianni, *bani Bonisagus*, headed the high Hermetic council of Florence. By all accounts a strict but generous wizard, he lavished constant attention and scholarship upon his only daughter. Apprenticed to one Contessa Regina Castiglione (a distant cousin to the author who would later write *The Courtier*), Carla excelled at elemental mastery and the Arts of Fate. When in 1457 her father is slain during certamen, Lady Gianni takes his place on the budding Council of Nine.

Unlike Augustus, however, Carla disagrees with the Council's mission. To her, the bastard Arts of reckless witches and heathens are an affront to everything she was taught to revere. Disgusted, she watches naked foreigners and babbling puffers defame the High Arts, pick fights with honest magi, and stir up trouble among the mortals. Like Heylel Teomim, she has decided that this so-called "Council" is doomed; unlike that *rebis*, she has decided to hasten its destruction by plotting with its enemies. In later days, it will be said that Heylel may have meant to strengthen the Nine with his treacheries. Lady Gianni means no such thing. She wants the Council disbanded, by force if necessary, but will not disgrace her father's name (or risk her own life) by opposing it openly.

To all appearances, Lady Gianni is beautiful, charming, well-bred and friendly. She listens intently to anything anyone has to say (for a variety of reasons) and meets with any representative who wants to be heard. Lustrous black hair, coifed in golden nettings, frames her olive skin; intelligent brown eyes look out from the face of a saint. Dressed in noble Florentine finery, this wealthy maiden spends incalculable riches to support the very Council she seeks to undermine; at night, her secret servants collect her information and funnel it into the hands of the Church, the High Guild and occasionally even the Satanist covens beneath the Italian streets. The allies she chooses aren't important, only the failure of the Council that would rather dilute the Arts than use them to fight.

Baroness Elizabeth Widenstide (1510-15??)

Those who feel that mortals cannot deal on equal footing with the Awakened have never met Baroness Widenstide. A favored mistress of King Henry VIII, hostess to mysteries, and an influential figure around the English court, this young but willful noblewoman commands an impressive vantage-point in wizardly politics. Although she is, by all indications, un-Awakened, she provides a safe haven for some, entertainment for many, and a dire threat to several wizardly conspirators.

A slight, pretty but charismatic girl, the Baroness marries when she's hardly 14; her husband, Edward, is a close friend of Henry VIII whose family estates had been granted when his father fell at Henry VII's side. Edward himself is slain when an assassin tries to kill young King Henry. Rather than force Elizabeth to remarry, the King grants all her husband's properties to the grieving Baroness; clearly, Henry has his own agenda at heart. In Elizabeth, the King finds a close friend, lover and ally.

When he begins his "great and secret business" in 1534, the King petitions the Baroness to help him confiscate Catholic properties within her domain. She proves trustworthy; by 1537, Elizabeth has received several generous dispensations and estates from the grateful King. Naturally, Elizabeth has *her* agendas, too. Though nominally Christian, Baroness Widenstide has distinctly Pagan sympathies. According to family legends, her great-grandparents, Lord and Lady Brackenshire, sheltered fae and Pagan folk during Wyndgarde's March, and may have provided them with a stronghold during the Decade of the Hunt. If the mysterious, otherworldly visitors that frequent Elizabeth's court are any indication, those tales are probably true. If nothing else, she's on good terms with many shadowy folk, and they seem to owe her a debt. As her estates and influence expand, the Baroness plays a growing part in Awakened politics.

Ensnconced in Hextonshire Manor, her luxurious castle, the Baroness hosts an opulent court of mysteries. Frequent visitors include wizards and witches from the Nine Traditions, faerie changelings, and other enigmatic folk. Naturally, Elizabeth takes pains to assure her own safety; all visitors are instructed to be discreet and behave themselves. Guests who violate the sanctity of Hextonshire Manor are dealt with harshly (and permanently), either by the Lady's mortal allies, the King's troops, or the many strange allies who frequent the castle.

ITEM, SECOND: MASTERS OF THE DANSE

As an ally of King Henry, the Baroness has been excommunicated and marked for death by the Roman Church. Consequently, she's careful to avoid "witchcraft" scandals. However, certain other parties have put her on the Black List, too; apparently, one of the abbeys in her domain provided the front for an English diabolist cult. Now, the forces of Hell and Heaven vie for Baroness Widenstide's life and soul. Fortunately, she's not alone; a keen wit, formidable allies, and a political acumen that belies her age make Elizabeth a very elusive, dangerous target.

Shakespeare's later words "and though she be but little, she is fierce" well suit Elizabeth Widenstide. Despite her diminutive (almost fey) stature and slender build, the Baroness has a presence that outweighs her physical appearance. Though refined, almost delicate in manner, she's known for nearly predatory wits and appetites. Elizabeth has three children (two daughters and a son) who mingle noble breeding and primal spirits. Behind their backs, the Widenstide family is occasionally called "that blonde wolfpack." Although they have no obvious connections to the Changing Breeds, Elizabeth Widenstide and her offspring live up to that reputation.



THE SECOND
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Item, Third: Hearts and Blades

...thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.
— William Wordsworth, *To Toussaint L'Ouverture*



find poisons to be a fascinating subject.”

The chancellor was using his “instructor’s voice.” Sitting at the table opposite Maria, he placed two goblets and a pitcher between them. With a significant glance, he poured wine for them both, and continued: “For example, your folk can work wonders with a few weeds from the nearest forest, whereas I have to spend small fortunes acquiring something effective — if that is what I want, of course.” He raised his goblet, drank — and Maria saw that he did truly swallow a good mouthful of the wine — and then watched as Maria did the same.

“On the other hand, those of us who do trade for what we need may at least acquire a few astonishingly clever toys, if that is what we want. Did you know, for example, that Saracen artificers have invented jugs that can pour two different liquids from the same spout, according to the whim of the person doing the pouring?”

He met Maria’s sudden stare with an opaque smile. “This, however, is a perfectly ordinary pitcher.” He picked the vessel up, swirled it around, and then topped up both goblets with a single pouring action, splashing only a bit of wine on the tabletop in the process. Maria shook her head in an attempt to shed the sense of unreality that his words seemed to induce. “The wine, on the other hand, was very expensive” the chancellor said, and drank again, then watched as Maria unthinkingly did the same. “It’s plain stuff in itself, but I’ve embellished it with certain rare

preparations from the Indies, worth the price of this ruby ring of mine....”

Maria suddenly realized she was teetering on the verge of unconsciousness. She struggled for a moment, wracking her memory for some kind of defense or counterspell, then surrendered and fell....

When she awoke, she found herself lying on a cold floor. It was tiled, she saw, in a checkerboard of black and white marble. Headsick and trembling, she raised herself on her hands and looked around, to see the chancellor seated in a lightweight chair three paces away. The whole large room seemed to be illuminated by brilliant moonlight, and was filled with plinths and stands on which rested sculptures and items of porcelain, all arranged in neat rows.

“Welcome to my palace” the chancellor said.

“This isn’t the palace...” Maria said, realizing as she spoke that she was mumbling. Unsteadily, she raised herself to her feet and began to look around with mage-trained eyes.

“Not the one you know, obviously. My palace. I brought you here to pay off your debt to me.”

“I owe you nothing.” Maria turned her back to the chancellor and feigned interest in the nearest plinth.

“That’s strange. By my accounts, you owe me your life.”

“There was no contract.” As she spoke, Maria took up the heavy, strangely curved vase that nestled atop the plinth, then turned on her heel and raised her hand to hurl the vase—

Save that her hand was now empty, and the vase rested in the chancellor's hands. He eyed it casually. "This reminds me of the first woman I ever bedded," he said, caressing the object lightly. "She was a harlot, but thoughtful and handsome enough. I'll thank you not to shatter that memory."

Setting the vase gently aside, he rose to his feet. "Come," he said, "I must show you the work we have to do."

Quiet Thunder

Oh, there may indeed be many magicians at court, but take note: there is no "court magick" as such. Rather, virtually every form of Awakened Art may be employed in the realms of politics and intrigue. Such circumstances, however, *do* encourage subtlety and elegance — a magus who gestures wildly and hurls fireballs in the royal hall will be crow's fodder by morning unless he quickly flees. (Even then, of course, he will be hunted down with the full resources of Church and State; after all, he's clearly one of Satan's own!) Besides, any courtier knows that the most beautiful jewels can become terribly gauche if displayed too freely. Magick in the court is used carefully and gracefully, with as little fuss and flash as possible.

In game terms, most swashbuckling magi employ magickal tools and styles that fit right in with the trappings of power and prestige. *Ars Cupiditae*, "the Art of Desire," has been developed specifically for this arena, although *Ars Praeclarus*, *Physic* and a smattering of *Miracle-working* and *High Ritual Magick* also have their places at the table. Naturally, some courtiers practice *Infernal workings* and *Pagan Witchcraft*, too, but these brave souls tread *very* lightly. Their charms and rites, if exposed, would mean certain death. Hence, court is the perfect place for *Daedalean* characters and the occasional *Hermetic magus*. As pp. 120 and 140 in the rulebook explain, these two factions spend a great deal of time and effort foiling one another in the halls of power... and they've adopted their Arts accordingly.

Ars Cupiditae: The Art of Desire

"Your true power comes from something much deeper than beauty. Cleopatra knew that... she could seduce a man at 20 paces without revealing an inch of flesh."

"How?"

"With her mind. Desire begins in the mind."

— Paoia and Veronica Franco, *Dangerous Beauty*

The Art of Desire represents the ongoing distillation of subtle yet potent influence. From a 21st-century viewpoint, this magick style (see sidebar) could be seen as a bizarre blend of rhetoric, mind games, fitness, metaphysics and

economic theory. In the terms of its own era, it represents an understanding of the human world so complete that it grants mastery over both the elements and the minds of men. Although it draws upon secrets as old as civilization itself, this magickal style is fairly contemporary, a work-in-progress that flows easily with the radical innovations of art, philosophy, commerce and even warfare that mark the Renaissance.

Despite its esoteric theories and teachings, this is a very pragmatic Art, meant to refine ignorant minds and slothful bodies into paragons of human achievement... and make a lot of money in the process. It's a science of influence rather than raw elemental command; a practitioner of *Ars Praeclarus* does not toss lightning bolts around, but rather shapes minds, emotions and societies through personal persuasion. In a way, *Ars Cupiditae* can be seen as a form of alchemy; it certainly follows the same principles. But whereas the alchemist strives turn to base materials into perfection, the *Floreatus* tries to perfect himself. As he does so, the lesser folk around him reward his efforts with their gold, their loyalty, their trust — and eventually, their lives.

Elements of the Ars Cupiditae

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.

— Aristotle, *Rhetoric*

The next room contained a set of plinths arranged in a semicircle, with the tallest in the center. Each was topped with a carved marble bust. The highest — its top above Maria's head — bore the image of a fine-featured, bearded man, whose expression somehow conveyed vast, analytical wisdom.

The chancellor noticed that the image had captured Maria's gaze. "Aristotle," he said casually. "'The Master of Those Who Know,' as the poet says."

"The old Greek philosopher. Was he of your kind?"

"I suppose he was, in a way. He was employed in the court of a great king, and he had mastered the art of rhetoric; I imagine he was Enlightened. We honor him. But his was a different world, I think, than the filth-strewn maggot-feast we now inhabit." He looked off into the chamber with an expression of

Magick Style: Ars Cupiditae

It's no great secret: If you want to change the world to fit your desires, you have to establish a bond with that world first. Once you've set up a relationship between yourself and your subject, you use certain tools to cause the changes you want to effect. Any magus understands as much — the primal cave-shamans painted likenesses of their prey on stone walls, then struck them with spears just before a hunt. A student of Ars Cupiditae does pretty much the same thing, but on a far more sophisticated level. Instead of luring her quarry in with a prayer then stabbing it with a spear, she seduces it with her literal charms and turns it to her will.

This Art combines the very old disciplines of seduction and athletics with the very new disciplines of humanism, rhetoric and fencing. A literal Renaissance man (or woman), the master of Ars Cupiditae studies philosophy, swordsmanship (if only as a teaching tool — hence, women study it as well), physicality, etiquette, concentration, and social gamesmanship. Challenging the old concept of a divinely-appointed hierarchy of souls and stations, the Floreatus seeks to raise himself physically, mentally and metaphysically to a higher plane... and, from there, to make other people do what he wants them to do.

Essentially, the Ars Cupiditae present the body, mind and soul as clockworks of Divine manufacture. A master of the Arts learns how to examine, dissect and recalibrate her own "clockworks" through a combination of mental and physical disciplines. From there, she progresses on to tinkering with other peoples' "mechanisms," eventually recalibrating society as a whole — in theory, at least. While Daedalean courtiers practice the most refined forms of this Art, older magickal societies — notably the Order of Hermes, Solificati and Ahl-i-Batin — employ variations of it.

Despite the mysteries of this very social magick, Ars Cupiditae employs a rather scientific approach. The Floreatus does not wave her hands and mumble gibberish; rather, she makes a fortress of her own mind and body, then begins "negotiating" with her peers from a position of strength. Through just the right combinations of oration, tools, social gamesmanship and intellectual conquest (with a little physical seduction of force thrown in for good measure), she establishes a "kingdom" around herself, then begins to expand that kingdom to an empire....

Ars Cupiditae is very much a product of its age. Under the medieval concept of inborn social rank, the idea of moving yourself up the ladder (especially through such ridiculous means as meditation and swordplay!) is worse than absurd; it's vaguely heretical! Some folk — including many Daedaleans — fear that Ars Cupiditae treads dangerously close to Infernalism. After all, the Devil seduces men with the fruits of desire, and this Art does likewise. There are a good many Craftsmasons and Gabrielites who fear the courtiers, whose "gifts" seem altogether too tempting for comfort. In time, this distrust will probably ripen into open hatred, and cause the first of many schisms within the Order of Reason....

Relying as it does on social graces, influence and trade, Ars Cupiditae is almost always casual. Few people would recognize its effects as "magick," although it is, at its core, as magickal as any witch's spell. As spellbooks and sorcery fall out of favor with the masses, this "magick of ideas" will take hold to become — and surpass! — the power of the old Arts. Despite its ancient foundations, Ars Cupiditae is the sorcery of the future. And the Renaissance court is its crucible... and its staging-ground.

disgust. "The priests tell us this is the best of all possible worlds, the holy pinnacle of God's plan for humanity. Bah!"

He turned to Maria, and she noted a fanatic's timbre in his voice. "There are better worlds, better possibilities, than this. We need only free ourselves from the chains of superstition, and we can bring it about."

Sympathetic Magick

The Arts of influence are essential parts of magick. Witch-folk make crude but effective charms out of hogs-fat, blood and mandragora; tribal shamans wear masks of clever beasts; the Celestial Singer pitches her voice to a vibrato that pierces a stubborn mind, while the demon-priest employs a Babylonian recipe to drive his quarry mad with greed. Whole schools (and Spheres) of magick are based around getting others to do what you want them to do. Ars Cupiditae goes one step better — it grants you influence over what they want, and helps you figure out what that desire is.

Sympathetic magick — the idea that like calls to like, and that what you do to one thing affects another thing connected to it — beats at the heart of such Arts. It's the principle behind the cave-painting or the beast-mask. And so, the charms that a witch weaves include mandrake and bits of hair, while an Infernalist tempts his victims with gruel seasoned with the sorcerer's blood. (See "Charms" in the rulebook, p. 261, and "Ritual Tools," pp. 265-269.) Men of Reason, of course, shun these crude superstitions. But in all myths, a wise man finds a grain of truth. As mysticks weave their charms from herbs and poppets, some folk seek a more scientific method to plant and sow desire's seeds.

The roots of this Daedalean refinement run very deep indeed. Some occultists even claim the Art of Desire sprang from the garden of Lilith, the primal demon-temptress. Naturally, the philosopher-scientists disregard such nonsense (although a bewildering number of High Guild women take the name "Lilith" when beginning their apprenticeships, much to the dismay of more-devout companions). The Queens Jezebel and Cleopatra were said to have mastered such magicks as well; with dizzying chants and strange perfumes, they could supposedly make almost any man beg for their favors. Clearly, these techniques went beyond simple whoring; they allowed men and women alike to tap the source of Desire itself. And naturally, such techniques have always found a welcome place at court....

Rhetoric and Philosophy

The formal study of rhetoric goes back to ancient Greece, where courts of law and democratic politics developed the discipline and made it useful. In its highest form, rhetoric is considered a comprehensive mental discipline, teaching mnemonic techniques, speaking style, rudimentary psychology, and persuasive logic. Even when it's used

by un-Awakened mortals, rhetoric can be damned fascinating. Combined with Enlightenment, it confers vast yet subtle powers over human (and theoretically even non-human) minds.

A mark of distinction, rhetoric proclaims "I am a member of the elite!" With superior knowledge, poise, logic and oratory, this discipline allows a skilled speaker to sway an audience — to replace their ideas with his own, or to at least get them to examine their ideas beyond a simple "Because it just is, that's why." Rhetoric is *the* social-intellectual trump card, too; with it, one can humble kings without losing one's head in the process. Few people want to look stupid, so most folk — even powerful ones — bow to someone who seems to have superior knowledge. Hence, the term "sophisticated," which bears connotations of wisdom, trickery, worldliness and complication. It's a word any good courtier can understand.

Like any hydra, rhetoric can bite with several heads at once. The ancient Greek Sophists (from *sophos*, "wise," *sophist*, "cunning expert," and *sophizesthai*, "to play clever tricks") employed their rhetorical skills on both sides of the law and all sides of government. Some used their expertise to elevate themselves above the masses, and to wheedle favors from rulers and commoners alike. Whatever purpose they chose, these skilled orators argued that man, not divinity, should be the measure of all things. The gods might or might not exist, but morality (so they claimed) is defined by personal circumstances, not by natural absolutes. If a man's family is hungry, some Sophists maintained, it's not wrong for that man to steal — it would, in fact, be morally *right* for him to do so. It's not hard to see the connection between such reasoning and the later observations of Machiavelli, or the deeds of his "ideal prince," Cesare Borgia.

Later, philosophers (from *philosophos*, "loving wisdom") like Socrates and Plato turned the Sophists' tricks against them, and strove to use logic and argument to better the human condition. (Naturally, if these philosophers managed to wheedle out a

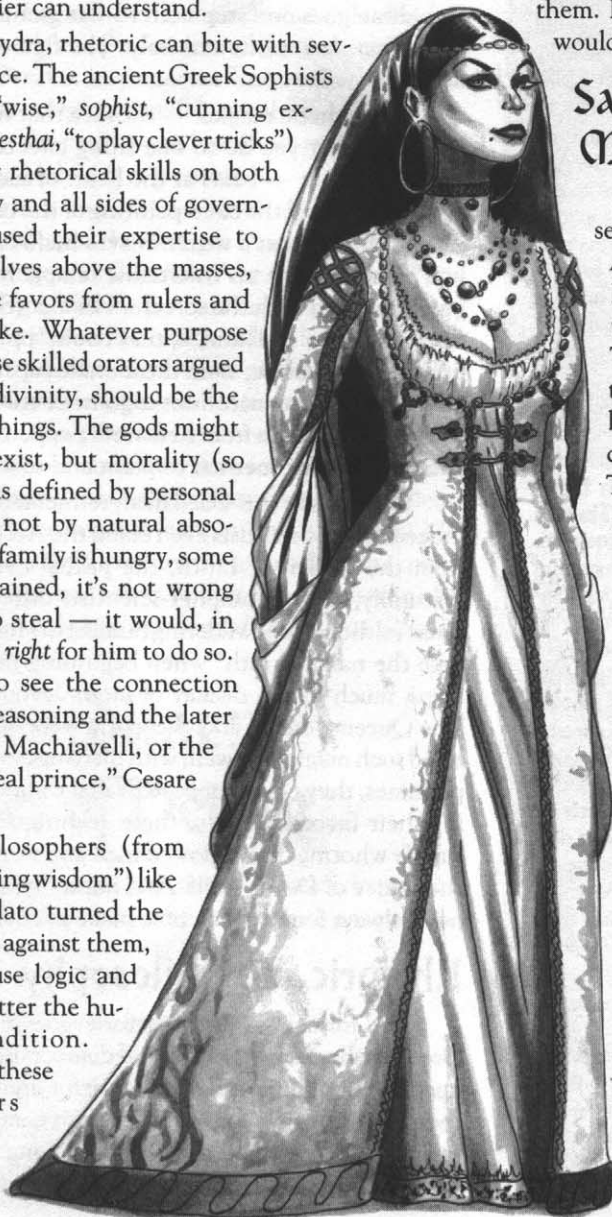
few favors for themselves, so much the better....) Plato challenged the Sophists' moral relativism with the idea that all things did, in fact, have a perfect state of being outside this imperfect world. Using his own rhetorical style, Plato depicted an ideal government, the Republic, in which all men could achieve their greatest possible potential. (Women, of course, were excluded from the equation; apparently, rhetoric hadn't stretched quite *that* far just yet.)

Although many of the formal techniques of rhetorical debate were wiped from common memory after the fall of Rome, many treatises were saved from destruction. Even after these records were forgotten, however, the oratory skills themselves remained important. A wise ruler, advisor or priest quickly learned how to manipulate his people, or he did not govern them for long. Secluded libraries preserved the Greek theories of rhetoric, and scholars studied them. Eventually, the rebirth of classical scholarship would set the rhetorical hydra free again.

Sacred Geometry and Mathematics

Although members of the High Guild now seek inspiration in rhetorician-philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, the foundations of the Daedalean version of the *Ars Cupiditae* lie in the 12th century, with the Craftmason Stephen Trevanus. A master of both sacred geometry and trade, Trevanus became convinced that ideas, like coins, could be minted, quantified and exchanged. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Trevanus was high-born, and received a formal education. Stephen was passably familiar with the philosophers' ideas; from fragments of various debates, he concocted a bastard hybrid of moral relativism, Platonic ideals and biblical teachings. Eventually, he combined these elements, mathematics, etiquette, sacred geometry and practical trade knowledge into a strange series of books called *Of the Coins of Human Thought and the Divine Properties Thereof*. Although this treatise was (and still is) considered too esoteric for common tradesmen or courtiers, Trevanus' ideas sparked inspiration among his fellows in the nascent Order of Reason.

The basis of Trevanus' work was simple, even if the work itself was not. Essentially, he claimed that human ideas and emotions exist in a Platonic "ideal state" somewhere between base matter and refined spirit. Those ideas are subject to the same laws of mathematics that define the natural world, and can be shaped by someone who un-



derstands those laws. Trevanus, a tradesman, epitomized those ideas as coins, and used trade as an example of his theory at work. As he pointed out, “value” is a human concept. Without the *idea* that gold is valuable, gold is simply another form of metal. It does not and cannot define a man, a house or a kingdom. Yet, once defined by certain laws, gold *does* define such things. When a man understands how to discern and manipulate those laws, Trevanus reasoned, he can value, divide or exchange ideas (and hence, the reality of material objects) as a merchant values, divides and exchanges coins.

From there, the concepts became more esoteric. Trade, Trevanus asserted, is susceptible to numerological study; after all, prices set in coinage make the abstract idea of “value” every bit as quantifiable as a building’s bricks. In his complex treatise, Trevanus combined the mathematics of trade with the secrets of sacred geometry. Through certain formulae, he claimed, a truly Enlightened “idea merchant” could apply the secrets of trade — and sacred geometry — to the secrets of the mind and emotions... could exchange them in a “marketplace” with other Enlightened tradesmen, and even alter the material world with them. Human will and desire — the whispers of God and Satan in the back of all men’s minds — could shape those ideas, just as heat, molds and hammers shape metal. In fact, he claimed, such shaping occurs all the time. Very few people understand what they’re doing, but they do it unconsciously just the same. Rhetorical devices, like memorization, visualization, rhythm and rhyme, and the “rule of threes” (see “Oration,” p. 89) provide the heat, molds and hammers for ideas. In this way, ideas are like coins: minted, altered and distributed among the human masses.

An idealist with a deep empathy for the common folk, Trevanus was horrified by the implications of his theory. He wrote the concepts down in hopes that an “enlighten’d societee of goode men annd honeste merchands” could elevate mankind from poverty and desperation. Sadly, it is said, he was driven somewhat mad when he realized greedy, exploitative men were using his theories (deliberately and otherwise). Eventually, Trevanus became a crusading hero in the forests of England. Over time, his obtuse works, like those of Plato and Socrates, were largely forgotten.

What does all this esoterica have to do with swinging a sword or seducing a lord? Nothing, and yet everything. For although very few of the new magus-courtier-philosophers actually study Trevanus, his theories influence many of their techniques. Trevanus had produced an awkward theory based on misunderstood fragments of ancient philosophy; his work, in turn, inspired other, less idealistic men. Various thinkers within the Order of Reason, including Wolfgang von Reismann, examined *Coins of Human Thought*; some even began to put Trevanus’ concepts into practice. These philosopher-scientists concluded that desire could shape the mind, just as craftsmanship shapes matter, space and

forces. Through literally sophisticated techniques, some members of the High Guild learned how to make people *want* things so badly they would literally change the world to get them. Mathematical theories were incorporated into swordsmanship as light-blade fencing developed. (See the Fencing Square presented in *The Sorcerers Crusade*, p. 285.) Soon, the new Art began to blossom. By the 14th century, with the rediscovery of classical learning (and the lost secrets of the Ixos), the emergence of humanism, and the spread of trade, the *Ars Cupiditae* flowered fully into being.

Recalibrating the Masses

If the numerology behind buying and selling inspired *Ars Cupiditae*, it was the drive for successful trade — for access to the desires, and hence the purses, of other folk — that made it powerful. While sacred geometry provided tools for the study of markets, folk charms and classical rhetoric offered influence over *people*. Soon, various High Guild philosophers set forth the idea of human beings as thinking mechanisms. After all, the Craftsmasons and High Guild were by now allied with both the Artificers (to whom Creation was a great mechanism built by God), and the Cosians (to whom the body was a living machine). Always willing to learn from their allies, visionary Guildsmen merged Enlightened science with humanist ideals. Through vigorous study, meditation and practice, these men and women learned how the human body, mind, soul, and society worked — and also, of course, how they might be adjusted.

From there, charm, trade, politics and instruction allow these adepts to spread their ideas (and ideals) through mortal society. By setting a grand example as a so-called “Renaissance man,” a Floreatus challenges other people to rise to his station. By giving them more and better luxuries, he makes them want to improve their lives. By teaching them more about the world in which they dwell, he attacks ignorance and supplants it with (his) knowledge. And by bridging the gaps between nobility and peasantry — and sometimes between cultures and nations, too — he incites them to throw down the past and eagerly embrace the future: *his* future, the world built on Reason.

To 21st-century eyes, this new Art might seem like a chaotic hodge-podge of antiquated charms, bizarre theories, psychology and parlor tricks. Actually, each of these tools has its use; some influence the world around the magus (usually through rhetoric, deception, sympathetic magick, or raw force), while others sharpen him like a good blade. A handful of tools do both. Like good merchants, the innovators behind *Ars Cupiditae* understood the value of many different disciplines: from frivolities like cosmetics and magic charms to sciences like rhetoric and high math, from Hermetic sigils to Arabian perfumes, from bread-breaking to blades, these Daedaleans incorporated anything

Humanism

The inquiry of truth, which is the love-making, or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature.

— Francis Bacon, *Essays*

At the heart of *Ars Cupiditae* lies a belief in the power of knowledge and enlightenment to raise a human being to something greater. It's an idealistic philosophy, but also a worldly one, which assumes that power and advancement in this world have true value. This idea, in truth, is in full accord with the spirit of the age — and much of the later Age of Reason and Modern Era depends on this assumption.

Things weren't always this way. During the Middle Ages, the dominant philosophy of the West was what will eventually be called "Scholasticism." Merging classical ideas with Christian devotion, the Scholastics sought to unify philosophy and faith. Scholasticism produced some brilliant thinkers, and preserved many ancient ideas and texts in monastic libraries, but it ultimately grew rigid and over-formal. According to this concept, a finite set of Scholastic tools and ideas were all that a thinker could (or should) ever know. Any deviation from those tools or ideas was dangerous and heretical. By the 14th century, Scholasticism was ripe for replacement.

The new ideas came first from medieval Italy, where a new set of thinkers, foremost among them the philosopher-poet *Petrarch* (1304-74), returned to original Greek and Latin texts for inspiration while exploring new ideas, from forms of poetry to politics. Over the next century, this new school of thought wins over secular rulers such as the Medicis, who found an informal "Platonic Academy" in Florence under *Marsilio Ficino* (1433-99). In the mid-1400s, the Byzantine Empire, faced with destruction by the Turks, sends scholar-ambassadors westwards to plead for aid from the Roman Catholic powers. Some of them carry knowledge or classical texts that western scholars had thought lost; when Constantinople fell in 1453, many more scholars and books arrived among the refugees.

Although the label "humanism" will be coined much later, these thinkers now focus on studying "the humanities" — grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. These, in turn, supposedly develop *humanitas*, "human virtue" in all its forms — not only the Christian values of benevolence and compassion, but also bravery, eloquence, beauty and other more "worldly" ideals. Renaissance humanism is first and foremost a system of education, intended to produce better thinkers and leaders. Despite its Pagan influences and worldly aims, however, it is not specifically anti-Christian. Many of its leading figures are devout churchmen, such as true "renaissance men" like *Leon Battista Alberti* (1404-72) and *Nicholas of Cusa* (1401-64), whose work merges humanist and Christian ideas to explore the place of Man within God's domain.

By medieval standards, humanism seems pretty modern. Nevertheless, it's hardly the sole province of the Order of Reason. Ficino translates the *Corpus Hermeticum* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, inserting Hermetic ideas about religion into the very heart of humanist philosophy. His pupil, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (1463-94) writes strongly religious texts (and eventually falls under the influence of Savonarola), studies the Jewish Kabbalah, and introduces both influences into humanist works. Eventually, the openly Hermetic *Giordano Bruno* (1548-1600) plays a large part in the later evolution of humanism. This "insult" is more than certain devout Daedaleans can bear; after several skirmishes between the Gabrielites and members of the Chœur Cèleste (who see Bruno's "sublime all" as a variation of their "One Voice"), Bruno is captured and burned alive for heresy.

Even so, humanism exerts a powerful appeal. In Germany and Austria, humanists break completely with the Church. The poet *Conradus Celtis* (1459-1508), known as "the Arch-humanist," gives lectures questioning the existence of the soul and of God; his followers go further, mocking religion with blasphemous parodies, and even their local opponents argue more in favor of the *utility* of religion, rather than for its *truth*.

Elsewhere, however, humanism and Catholicism remain on better terms; the Dutch *Erasmus* (1469-1536) is a sincere Catholic, although he recognizes (and satirizes) corruption within the Church. His friend, the British *Sir Thomas More* (1477-1535) is a humanist scholar, yet remains so devoutly Catholic that he rejoices in the death of heretics before eventually dying for his own beliefs. Even under the best of circumstances, though, humanism and Christianity remain awkward bedfellows; in time, the term "humanist" comes to refer to "one who studies the world," as opposed to "one who studies the Divine."

Humanism casts a titanic light across Renaissance Europe. Writers such as Rabelais and Shakespeare, artists such as Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci, theorists like Machiavelli and Erasmus, and even early "feminists" like *Isabella d'Este* (1474-1539) and *Sophia Brahe* (1556-1643), reject medieval myopia in favor of a world defined by human measure. Although the ideal of the perfect "Renaissance Man" eventually falls to skepticism (and the idea of perfection through mystical study *certainly* loses favor), humanism's focus on mankind as the measure of all things dominates European — and eventually human — thought for centuries to come. Odds are, everyone reading this book was brought up, in a broad sense, as a humanist. Take that as a measure of the victory of the Order of Reason.

that might recalibrate the human machine. It took centuries for the Guildsmen to merge their ideas into a coherent Art. But, pragmatists above all, they had been achieving results well before then.

Training

“To master others,” a famous maxim goes, “you must first master yourself.” Ars Cupiditae takes this saying quite literally. Before he learns the secrets of external mastery, an apprentice of these “high arts and sciences” must traverse a gauntlet of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual challenges. No weaknesses or doubts are permitted — the Arts are like tightropes strung across the soul, and if the “walker” falters or the “rope” goes slack, he falls. The groups that specialize in Ars Cupiditae (the High Guild, Ksirafai, and — in slightly different and far more spiritual variations — the Ahl-i-Batin and Order of Hermes) school and test their pupils vigorously. The learning process is merciless, but it produces the sharpest minds and bodies of this age.

First of all, the student is taught to question, but to do so gracefully. (Lords and scholars do not appreciate having their authority challenged, after all.) Social, physical and intellectual etiquette is drilled into the student, first with memorization (“*When in Arabia, do not eat with your left hand...*”), then with constant exercises. Meanwhile, arm-masters, performers and courtesans train the initiate in an array of physical disciplines that range from fencing to juggling to sexual seduction. (See sidebar.) Having constructed an adequate foundation, the aspiring Floreatus then studies an array of ancient charms and tricks, along with mathematics, humanist philosophy and formal classical rhetoric. All the while, the other tutors step up their physical training. Finally, several months into the instruction, the secrets of the Enlightened Arts are taught. By the time he or she finishes this apprenticeship, the Floreatus is a formidable courtier and fighter, regardless of gender.

Aspects of the Art

As magi go, the Floreati are fairly subtle about their arcane talents. They can, however, be pretty flamboyant in other ways — the term “swashbuckler” often seems to have been invented for them! Between their mundane skills and their Enlightened understanding of human nature, these Daedaleans tend to be a pretty wealthy lot... and they don’t mind showing *that* off at all!

Despite its innovative nature, Ars Cupiditae shares many of the common features of older styles of magick. It has its own variations on particular themes, however....

The Spheres

To an initiate of Ars Cupiditae, the Spheres of Influence are philosophical abstracts that grant a person access

Common Tools and Exercises

No artisan can learn the mighty secrets of Ars Praeclarus without spending quality time at the forge and drawing-board. Likewise, an apprentice in the Arts of Desire needs to hone her mind, body and mundane skills before she’s ready to grapple with the Enlightened secrets behind those Arts.

To that end, masters of several different disciplines tutor the initiate with a variety of challenges. Naturally, these lessons begin fairly easy and grow harder with each week. The pupil is expected to complain and fail, of course, but is rarely allowed to do so without some stern (and often physical) chastisement. Such instruction is extraordinarily harsh, but it breeds survivors. By the time the Floreatus graduates from training, she can handle most situations with trained reflexes rather than hesitation. (See the movies *Dangerous Beauty* and *The Mask of Zorro* for wonderful examples of such schooling.)

Common training subjects and techniques include:

- **Alchemy:** Although the esoteric secrets of alchemy are left to specialists, every student learns the basic principles of this transformative discipline. She might not be able to actually *do* anything with that knowledge, but by graduation the student must at least understand the fundamental symbols and theories behind alchemy.
- **Balance:** Female or male, the pupil must move gracefully. Thus, the tutor forces his apprentice to walk, dance and perform other tasks with heavy books or pitchers of water on her head.
- **Calisthenics:** Although physical exercise is far less refined than it will be by modern age, time-honored exercises like handstands, weight lifting, pull-ups and running are cornerstones of a Floreatus’ fitness regimen.
- **Carnal Knowledge:** Regardless of her gender or religion, each pupil is schooled in sensuality, flirtation and lovemaking — as well as disease prevention, contraception and basic anatomy.
- **Fencing:** Guildsmen (and women) are among the first Europeans to refine rapid-strike swordfighting styles. From the beginning, fencing and dagger-work form essential parts of Ars Cupiditae training.
- **Grooming and Horsemanship:** Any well-bred person is expected to ride. Thus, a student is schooled in basic equestrian skills — for exercise, recreation, self-discipline, social grace, and the empathy that comes with the horse-and-rider bond.
- **Mock Meals:** Each week, an aspiring Floreatus attends a formal gathering, complete with extensive manners and complex social challenges. She’s graded by how she handles the exercise, and punished for every mistake she makes.
- **Oration:** The pupil is forced to seek publicly each week, and learns oratory skills like debate, body language, basic intimidation, and a variety of other tactics.
- **Reading, Writing and Mathematics:** Ignorance is not tolerated in the Guild. Every student is schooled in basic reading, grammar, interpretation, and arithmetic.
- **Socratic Dialogues:** Throughout instruction, the tutor questions everything the student says, forcing the student to define what she believes — or to argue back in equally effective terms.

For game purposes, assume that any character trained in Ars Cupiditae has at least one dot in all the following Traits: Academics, Athletics, Etiquette, Expression, Fencing, Meditation, Metaphysics (alchemy), Riding, Seduction, and Subterfuge.

to Platonic ideals. By manipulating these keys with a variety of tools (below), the Floreatus brings wondrous things about.

The twin disciplines of **Life** and **Mind** lie at the heart of Ars Cupiditae. Both affect the other, and each one reflects the intricacies of human form and consciousness. It's a rare Floreatus who doesn't command at least one of them, and most study both.

As a student of classical philosophy and mathematics, the Floreatus tends to see **Connection** as a matter of abstruse mathematical relationships. Admittedly, she'll also employ a few archaic scrying-rituals to see distant places, but the advanced student is expected to understand that such "wizardries" are simply mathematical techniques in another form. In a similar vein, the **Entropy** discipline allows a mortal man to take on (and influence) Fate and Fortune — and win. Both Spheres provide a lot of esoteric headaches for the budding Floreatus, but the end results are worth the aggravation.

Raw **Forces** and **Matter** are simpler Spheres, ones that explain the physical powers and materials of this world. **Prime** can be far more problematic, although Platonic philosophy and advanced alchemy explain a good deal about the *Quinte Essence* and its forms. As for **Spirit**, the average Floreatus looks to God, and to folk-tales of the many odd beings that inhabit the fringes of this world. As the Craftsmasons discovered long ago, however, such entities are still susceptible to the arcane symbols and mathematical equations of ancient Solomonic and Hermetic disciplines. With pentacles and complex chants, a skilled Floreatus can manipulate spirits and ghosts just as she manipulates mortal men.

Time provides the greatest paradox for a Daedalean. On one hand, clocks and linear reasoning maintain that time is an immutable, solid current. On the other hand, a skillful Resplendent should be able to speed up God's "clockworks" just as she could any other form of clock, if only as an extension of theory. Very few Floreati burden themselves with the esoteric ramifications of Time study, although many use the fruits of such research to plan ahead, look behind, or speed their physical reflexes to an inhuman level. In such cases, the Floreatus isn't so much changing time itself so much as she's changing her own *perceptions* and *reactions* to time.

Tools

*Shopkeeper, give me colour
to make my cheeks red,
so that I can make the young men
love me against their will*

— Carl Orff, *Carmina Burana: Chramer, Gip die Varwe Mir*

If the Spheres provide the keys to Creation, the various tools a Floreatus employs provide the material and pattern

of those keys — and the locks, as well. In keeping with the grace and subtlety of Ars Cupiditae (and the courtly settings it was made for), the tools of that Art are classy and refined. The person who employs them looks good doing so, and the fascination he or she elicits from the prey is just another aspect of the Ars Cupiditae at work.

Common tools of this Art include:

- **Alchemy and Potions:** Despite the mystic overtones of alchemy, this spiritual and material discipline is the chemistry of its day. Essentially, the alchemist studies materials and their properties and reactions to one another. By refining those materials, or by altering their state, the alchemist hopes to change things to his advantage.

As Solificati know, material mastery is only the most obvious purpose of alchemy. Underneath the bubbling potions and false gold, a sincere alchemist tries to unlock the secrets of self-perfection. While a Floreatus would agree with that sentiment (and studies theoretical alchemy for that reason), he also knows there are all *sorts* of uses for the acids, solvents, medicines, poisons, and other concoctions that flow from the alchemist's workshop. Many Floreati simply acquire those by-products from an alchemical specialist; a few, however, try to brew these concoctions themselves — with literally mixed results. (See the rulebook, pp. 93, 264 and 266 for system details about alchemy.)

- **The Art of Memory:** A master of Ars Cupiditae adapts this classical memory-training technique into a powerful magickal tool. See the Memory Palace sidebar for details.

- **Bezoars:** A bezoar is a solid object, usually an obstruction, extracted from the intestines of an animal or human. In future centuries, the word will be used mostly among doctors, who consider bezoars an occasional medical problem — compacted food, swallowed hairs (the classic "hairball"), or almost anything else that can cause such trouble.

In earlier times, however, a bezoar is a thing of small power — a "belly-stone" that dispels poisons on contact. Such wonders often come from Persian wild goats and various antelopes, while lesser versions come from the alpine chamois (the "German Bezoar") and, with the discovery of the New World, the Peruvian lama. Cleaned and polished, bezoars are attractive enough to be incorporated into items of jewelry. Like gemstones (below), such items are *de rigueur* at feasts and other courtly affairs.

According to legend, bezoars neutralize poison on contact. Often, the stone is ground up or dissolved into antidotes and treatments. Twentieth-century tests suggest that a bezoar actually *can* absorb or neutralize arsenic — a common enough poison — so the folklore may have some validity. Other sources suggest that a bezoar changes color on contact with arsenic, making it a useful tester, if not an actual antidote.

The Memory Palace

To think is to speculate with images.

— Giordano Bruno, *Of Images...*

The classical tradition of rhetorical training (originally presented as a set of tools for lawyers in ancient Greece or Rome) incorporates some very powerful mnemonic techniques. *Ars Cupiditae* refines these disciplines into an Enlightened Art. One vital technique involves the creation of a “memory palace” — an imaginary building in the student’s mind. Within this “palace,” different parts of the building are assigned to different subjects, and symbols placed within the “structure” recall items or facts that the character wishes to remember.

When she needs to remember something, a Floreatus mentally “moves herself” to the appropriate part of the palace, locates the relevant symbol, and from it recreates the desired memory. For example, the “room” assigned to alchemy might have walls marked with a flame, a fountain, a pillar and a fan (representing the four elements), each with a door leading to the “room” that holds the specific element. In the center of the room, there might be a statue of a Greek god, thrice the height of a man, to symbolize Hermes Trismegistus (“Hermes Thrice-Great”). There might also be shelves of scrolls, each with depictions of specific alchemical theories in symbolic form. An advanced student may expand such a palace into a whole city.

This technique involves a great deal of hard mental work, and requires a keen mind and meditation exercises to use effectively. Once the “foundations” for the memory palace have been laid, however, it can be a formidable storehouse and refuge. Although the palace is usually static once it’s been “built,” some Floreati master the meditation so completely that they can sometimes “install” active “mechanisms” in their palaces. A Floreatus who studies the Sphere of Time, for example, might have a palace with a (completely reliable) clock in its tower. One who prefers Forces might have a working smithy in his palace, while a Mind master acts out her orations on a mental stage lined with grinning, movable masks.

Scholars of all kinds have employed this technique for ages. Christian thinkers (notably St. Thomas Aquinas) use it to order their study of theological ideas, linking the “palace” to the theological virtue of prudence. It’s possible that poetic visions (such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*) and Renaissance artwork may be based on mental “structures” built around religious ideas. On the downside, a memory palace might become a prison for a Floreatus who falls into Quiet or is thrown into a Scourge Realm. In all cases, the memory palace draws inspiration from the mental and emotional state of the person who “builds” it. If a magus happens to be particularly gloomy or paranoid, her palace may be fearful indeed.

According to some authorities, a *truly* skilled expert can work magick by manipulating the symbols and devices within his memory palace, drawing down and directing magical powers in the external world with pure imagination. This may explain how Hermetics and Floreati with really high levels of Arete (7+) can transcend the need for magical tools: Their tools are inside their minds.

In game terms, a Floreatus can access his memory palace by spending a few turns meditating (see the Meditation Trait), during which the player rolls Intelligence + Meditation. The more complicated the feat, the higher the difficulty and the longer the trance. Remembering the name of someone you met years ago would be simple (one turn, difficulty 6), while unspooling a complicated mathematical equation you memorized a decade ago would be harder (difficulty 8, three turns or so).

With advanced hypnosis (in other words, Mind 3 plus that Skill), a Floreatus can draw another person into his memory palace. The journey is totally imaginary, and ends when and if the other character wins a resisted Willpower vs. Willpower roll, difficulty 8. During a particularly bad Scourging, the Floreatus might become his own victim; a Quiet mindscape or a Scourge Realm based on the memory palace could swallow the character until he finds his way out. (See pp. 236-237 in the rulebook.) In this case, the Floreatus may have to return to memories of his apprenticeship to find the key to escape....

Courtier magi of all kinds utilize bezoars in jewelry, counterspells and healing potions. In game terms, the “stone” provides a focus for Life-and-Matter-based workings that involve poison and its antidotes.

- **Charms:** Although they’re not considered stylish among High Guildsmen, the truth is that old-fashioned love spells and amulets still work pretty well. Young Floreati often carry a couple of odd trinkets — poppets, herbal charms, love philters, and so on — with them when they go a-courting. (See the Folk Charms sidebar, p. 101)

- **Clothing:** By adopting a perfectly selected manner of dress, the Floreatus commands attention and respect. Given time to prepare and the right wardrobe from which to choose, a Daedalean can present herself in the most flattering light imaginable. In this case, the dress becomes the focus for the “spell” she quite purposefully weaves.

Clothes have other uses, too. With a good Enlightened tailor and a few “enhancements,” a garment may be woven into light, innocuous armor; poisoned; charmed; fitted with secret pockets, or otherwise improved beyond simple adornment.

One item of dress deserves special mention: The swash-buckling courtier often finds a well-chosen *cloak* invaluable. Apart from looking damnably impressive when worn with a little panache, the cloak can distract, divert and deflect attention — or almost anything else. It can also conceal a mage’s hands or other items, help him hide in dark alleys, and obscure actions that might be considered “vain magick” if they were seen by mortal witnesses. (See also “Costumes and Fashion” in Item, First.)

- **Cosmetics and Perfume:** Like clothing, cosmetics modify a wearer’s appearance, scent and presence. Since

Fencing as Magick

The basic rules for fencing combat are given in the *Sorcerers Crusade* rulebook, and the subject is discussed at greater length in Appendix I of *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*. However, those volumes deal with fencing as, essentially, a mundane skill. Some magi, however, know it also as a branch of magick.

A fencing magician uses pretty much the same techniques as his mortal counterpart; if he wants to, he can run an opponent through just as fatally without calling on his Daemon, thank you very much, and an un-Enlightened fencing master would see nothing strange about the move employed. But it's *also* something more. Fencing — even the mundane sort — takes combat training to a new level, invoking discipline, intelligence and vast subtlety in ways no other fighting art (except the mysterious martial arts of the Far East) can match. In some cases, a fencer transcends mere cut, thrust and parry, and perceives the whole world like a giant street brawl — something the expert can surpass and dominate. Fencing, for such an Enlightened combatant, thus becomes a metaphor for living — and a very useful tool, as well.

Fencing is not, and will never be, as comprehensive, subtle or powerful as the Akashic Brotherhood's Do; it does, however, share many of the same qualities of that Art, and certainly provides both useful maneuvers and excellent mental and physical discipline. Fencing also has a (literal) over Do in European courts; mortals can accept wondrous feats from a swordmaster, while a howling lunatic who breaks stone with his bare hands appears to be one of Satan's minions. Because fencing is taught as an integral part of *Ars Cupiditae*, a surprising number of female Daedaleans know the skill to some degree; this, in turn, offers a crucial advantage to such women, even if they don't regularly wear blades at their sides.

A really accomplished fencer can use his swordsmanship as a focus for certain enchantments and procedures, too. The mental discipline and mathematical nature of fencing training, and its concern with space and position, make it especially appropriate for Mind- and Connection-related magicks. (See the Fencing Square on p.285 of the *Sorcerers Crusade* rulebook for an example of the relationship between geometrical fencing and Connection.) Naturally, it's also an ideal focus for Life-based attacks, Forces-related deflections, and Mind-based intimidations. Just the *sound* of a well-drawn blade, especially in the hands of a formidable swordmaster, can be enough to make some foes back down while allies rally to the fencer's cause. *En garde!*

A few common "fencing effects" can be found under "Workings," below. A handful of stunts that any good fencer can perform have been presented in Appendix I of this book.

most courtiers wear some kind of make-up or scent (if only for hygienic reasons!), this tool makes an ideal focus for Mind and Life spells. An alchemist or herbalist mixes a potion into the make-up, the courtier applies it, and *voilà!* Instant effect.

- **Dance:** The adept socialites of *Ars Cupiditae* understand the transcendent power of dance. Unlike other mages, though, these courtiers dance to create direct results (or simply for pleasure), not to please patron spirits. Given the popularity of courtly intricate dances, the rhythmic give-and-take makes an ideal focus for charm spells, dizzying enchantments, and other social trickery.

- **Eye Contact:** The simplest and yet most effective *Ars Cupiditae* techniques involve long gazes, fleeting glances, and hypnotic stares. Locking eyes (or evading them, in certain cases) with her target, the Floreatus attracts the subject's attention, establishes contact between them, then exerts her will over his. A subtle but elaborate "language" of eye contact adds an extra layer to courtly intrigues; with certain additional talents, such as Mind magick or the Merit: *Enchanting Gaze*, a courtier can become truly unforgettable....

- **Gemstones and Jewelry:** In this setting, *everyone* wears jewelry. Renaissance courts fairly blaze with polished gems and shining gold, and bigger is usually better. But this ostentatious display is not always as empty as it might appear. According to folklore, most gems have protective properties. By wearing a certain bit of jewelry, a courtier tries to get those protective properties to rub off on him.

A truly detailed list of gemstones and their mystical properties is beyond the scope of this supplement; a good book about symbolism (like Miranda Bruce-Mitford's *The Illustrated Book of Signs & Symbols*, for instance) can be really helpful if you want to know more. Common courtstones include: coral (all-around ward against enchantments and ill-fortune); cornelian (confers confidence); copper (protects against wounds and disease); gold (dispels darkness); jet (safeguards the soul); lodestone (grants sexual powers); pearl (protects innocence); and ruby (wards off illness and poison). Any one of these can be used as a ritual tool for spells that match the stone's "purpose."

- **Fencing:** A training tool, exercise and combat skill in one, fencing can *also* focus magickal abilities. See the sidebar for details.

- **Machinery:** When all else fails and spectacular results are required, a merchant should never be ashamed to trade with her allies — and the Artificers create many wondrous toys which can serve interesting purposes. (See *The Artisans Handbook* for some of the possibilities.) Naturally, the Floreatus must understand the underlying theories to use such *Machinae* properly, but as educated Renaissance gentlefolk with excellent memories, this need not be a problem. Small guns, needle-tipped blades, and

precision-ground lenses are common tools, but anything is theoretically possible.

- **Manners:** One thing that divides the Renaissance — or at least, its more polite and sophisticated representatives — from the Middle Ages is the growth of the concept of *good manners*, or formalized etiquette. Daedalean courtiers understand the power inherent in such social refinements: When human beings choose to live within a system of rules, they're essentially making a mechanism, and mechanisms can be controlled.

Nor have the Daedaleans entirely abandoned the Hermetic principle *As Above, So Below*; etiquette, the law that governs normal human relationships, may be echoed in the human body or in nature. A Floreatus moves through the world along calculated lines, and when she wishes it, her actions create echoes in that world.

- **Mathematics:** Although they're not as adept with abstract numeric theory as, say, the Ahl-i-Batin, or as concerned with quantitative science as many Artificers, Floreati nonetheless tend to be well-trained mathematicians by the standards of their age. Complex equations lie at the heart of many Connection, Entropy and Spirit workings, and while very few field agents employ such cumbersome theorems, their superiors often give out diagrams based on truly brain-breaking coordinates. (See the Fencing Square in the rulebook for an example of such mathematics in action.)

- **Oration:** Spoken words, which symbolize the link between the mind, the body and the soul, form perhaps the most effective tools in a Floreatus' collection. Classical rhetoric, public speaking, chants, and even the timbre of one's voice all affect the human mind, emotions and will on a metaphysical level. Hence, all Guildsmen are trained in the fine arts of conversation and address, and employ those skills as foci for most Mind-oriented Effects.

- **Potions and Poisons:** Aside from "classical" alchemy, some Floreati study simpler potion-lore, picking up poisonous tricks and herbal concoctions from all manner of sources. See "Folk Charms" and "Poisons and Drugs" later in this chapter, and the appropriate entries in the rulebook and *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*.

- **Sensuality:** Like eye contact and speech, touch allows one person to assert incredible influence over another, especially in a setting where casual contact is forbidden. Although sexuality is perhaps the most obvious "weapon" in a Floreatus' arsenal (especially if she's a courtesan), a simple caress, gesture, massage or kiss can turn a distant adversary into a willing companion.

Vanity and the Scourge

If the world is full of platitudes... well, cliched sayings only became well-known because they so often seem true. One of the sayings that High Guildsmen often repeat with a pensive smile is *Everything has a price*. To these adepts, the Scourge is the price of power. Although no one actually enjoys this deadly fee, some thoughtful Guild philosophers confess that the Scourge is actually a good thing; without it, Ars Cupiditae would seem too random and uncontrolled — a mockery of their own craft of buying and selling.

Most Ars Cupiditae workings seem casual by mortal standards. Guildsmen, however, are a proud lot, often given to testing the limits of their skills and flexing their metaphysical muscles perhaps a bit too often for comfort. Thus, God's Scourge sometimes descends upon their backs, especially when a courtly Daedalean gets carried away with his charm spells and actually usurps another person's will. God's province is not mocked so easily, and even a subtle magus might find Scourgelings like Whisper, Ber Willider, the Flowered Temptress or the Burning Page paying him the occasional visit.

(*Storyteller's Note:* Yes, this is permission for you to inflict a badly-deserved visitation on a courtier who abuses casual Mind-based spells, even if he hasn't piled up a lot of Scourge points.)

For the most part, spectacular bursts of Divine fire tend to haunt artisans and wizards, not courtier-types. Instead, the baneful effects of magick manifest in subtle ways: witch marks, madness, and visitations from demonic spirits who seem frighteningly human. On very rare occasions, a Scourge Realm or firestorm might envelop a Floreatus; usually, though, a backlash matches the sins of most courtiers: pride, lust, avarice, envy and deceit.

When a courtier reaps a Boon instead of a Bane, the results can be glorious: sudden wealth, good fortune, increased beauty and helpful spirit "companions" reward the magus who dares to make a place for herself in the world. Such blessings can be mixed in the long run, though; success tends to breed greater pride, which in turn precedes a fall....

Fortunately, Ars Cupiditae teaches self-mastery above all. In game terms, a Floreatus usually has Meditation Skills that most other European magi lack. This, in turn, lets her avoid a backlash through purification before things get out of control. In story terms, these exercises may take the form of intensive fencing exercises, arcane mathematical calculations, exploration of a memory palace, or even the composition of incomprehensibly complex poetry. It's not an easy process, but like any good merchant the Floreatus would rather pay her account before it becomes overdue.

Workings

Not for nothing am I

Labeled the greatest trickster of Seville.

— Don Juan, from Tirso de Molina's *The Playboy of Seville*

Maria stood, her fists clenched by her side, in the midst of a room whose walls were covered in Greek letters. "I will go no further without answers," she announced. "You have brought me here — now tell me why."

"Very well." The Chancellor looked down and frowned. "My reasons are simple. You are a witch, whereas I am a scholar. Although I have read much about witchery, I have no true experience of spellcraft. On that, you can advise me. Now, look out of that window."

With a shrug, Maria obeyed. Almost instantly, she stepped back aghast.

"Yes," said the Chancellor, "you recognize it, don't you? That means you're quite wise, for I don't believe that you're damned — and that's hellfire burning out there, in the heart of my memory."

"No, dear witch, you might not be damned. But I, by my own hand, may be..."

Courtly Tricks

Floreati dislike the word "spells"; a spell, to them, is a formulaic piece of vanity worked by some twisted superstitionist. The student of rhetoric and mathematics is both more lawful and more flexible than a so-called "magus," and he masters the world through subtlety and skill, not Hell-born trickery. Even so, he has more in common with such sorcerers than he would like to admit. Many of his best techniques mirror old spells so exactly that he's essentially a magus whether he admits it or not.

In game terms, courtly magi employ many of the same weaveries. The magick styles may differ, but the results are pretty similar. A witch in Rowan Castle and a Floreatus in the Vatican use charm spells to achieve their ends, stealth spells to move around quietly, and blade-skills to defeat foes hand-to-hand. Naturally, both characters would sooner die than admit their common Arts, but within the framework of *The Sorcerers Crusade*, it's all the same thing.

Most courtly spells qualify as "uncanny influence" (for details, see that listing in the rulebook). The following weaveries come in extraordinarily handy in courtly situations, too. Some have been devised by Guildsmen or Ksirafai, but many are quite a bit older than those associations. Meanwhile, Appendix I boasts an array of stunts that *any* swashbuckler can enjoy. Have fun storming the castle....

Courtier's Senses/ Merchant's Appraisal (• or •• any Sphere)

Every courtier wishes she could have eyes in the back of her head. This little trick provides the next best thing — an array of senses of superhuman acuity. Students of *Ars Cupiditae* (including Ksirafai) are taught to expand their senses with meditation and special devices, while witches and other mysticks invoke spirits or extraperceptual visions to show them what no mortal could see.

Along similar lines, a Floreatus is trained to recognize value; thus, a merchant-magus can take a few moments to appraise an object, place or person and note its flaws, virtues and potential worth. Thus armed, he can commence negotiations....

[Essentially, any "sensory magick" Effect is possible so long as it can be explained as a refined application of normal human senses (touch, sight, taste, smell and hearing). This can provide a potential drawback, of course — to notice poison, the courtier usually has to sniff or taste the poisoned beverage first... which can, of course, backfire if the poison is strong enough. Otherworldly perceptions, like Entropy, Mind, Prime and Spirit, can be shrugged off as "hunches," although a courtier whose "hunches" are all too accurate might soon earn an uncanny reputation among her peers.]

[A detailed **Appraisal** of a person usually requires Mind 2. Generally, people are harder to read than simple objects.]

Bewitchment (•• or ••• Mind; may add •• Entropy or ••• Life)

A Floreatus understands desire in all its aspects, and sometimes exploits it in its simplest, most powerful form: sex. This may not be especially moral or respectable, but it's quite natural, and it most assuredly works. Contrary to misogynistic stereotypes, magi of both sexes (and all kinds) use this technique with equal ease and skill. After all, everyone has desires.

[Using speech, manners, costume, cosmetics, potions, human nature or all of the above, the Floreatus literally enchants his "victim." Normally, this is a simple Mind 2 Effect, but producing a long-term, obsessive interest requires Mind 3. Sophisticated seducers have been known to weave Entropy in with the Mind to wear down even the sternest moral or emotional resistance; Life, meanwhile, can induce bursts of animal passion, or ensure that the consummation is everything the subject hoped it would be....]

Courtesan's Draught/Blessed Heir (•• or ••• Life; sometimes with •• Connection added)

A minor irony: Generations of rustic witch-trials (justified or hysterical) center around claims that the accused has rendered some woman infertile — a serious charge in this era! Meanwhile at court, calculating folk who use sex for other purposes seek that curse as a boon... while many rustic witches actually use this charm to *increase* fertility!

[In game terms, controlling one's own fertility (whether one is male or female) in either direction requires Life 2;

ITEM, THIRD: HEARTS AND BLADES

aiding others to the same end requires Life 3. The Life-only variation allows the caster to control fertility by touch or potion, while the Connection variation lets her do so at a distance.

[Fertility potions and contraceptive draughts have endless variations (most of them foul), and no one knows what goes on inside your own body. Hence, this weavery is almost always casual.]

Distant Sight (•• Connection; may add •• Time or other Spheres)

High Guildsmen are not as obsessed with material wealth as their enemies like to suggest, but they *do* often have some property they don't like to lose. Some Floreati, therefore, learn rather archaic scrying tricks that help locate missing items; among the merchant-Daedaleans, such secrets are generally considered a little heretical, but undeniably useful.

Valuable items are often "consecrated" or "attuned" to the merchant-magus while they're still in his possession. Later, if something gets lost, the Guildsman will have an easier time finding his treasure. Most scrying techniques involve staring into a bowl of clear water while chanting a simple incantation, then interpreting any visions seen. There are dozens of variations, though, ranging from crystal-gazing to Tarot-reading, tea leaves, and prayer. The latter is considered the only acceptable form of divination by pious Daedaleans, who take a dim view of sorcery even when it's practiced by one of their own....

[This is a basic Connection spell; see the Connection Ranges Chart for the number of successes necessary to view a distant place or item. Of course, merely *seeing* a thing may not help locate it; several more successes may be needed to determine its whereabouts with any useful precision.]

[A master scryer can employ other Spheres in his search, too. Time 2 can discern the past or future of the object, while Life or Matter might allow the magus to spy on a person or place rather than a thing. In all cases, a familiar object will be easier to find than an unfamiliar one. It's worth mentioning that noticing things from afar is pretty vain; a Floreatus who uncovers such secrets ought to keep his talents (and findings) to himself.]

The Geometry of Trade (•• Time; sometimes adds •• Connection and •• Mind, or •• Entropy)

Members of the High Guild excel at combining book-keeping with arcane numerology. Given a little time to observe the trade in a particular region, along with a quill pen, ink and a few reams of parchment for calculation, an expert Guildsman can predict prices and trade opportunities for months ahead — something that other folk of the age find uncanny. Given a few facts and time to question the local lords and peasants, an Enlightened merchant may also uncover what people want in a given place, and find a market for certain goods there. Although these aren't

especially spectacular weaveries, such calculations make "Black Uncles" very rich indeed....

[This is really more of a Storytelling device than a turn-by-turn spell. If nothing else, it requires a lot of time and preparation to assemble the information and draw the conclusions. Even so, it can make a character fairly rich over the long haul, providing she's got the time, skills and leisure to put all the pieces together.

[A Floreatus must have at least three dots in Science (mathematics) to pull this off, and needs a bit of time to work things out and take advantage of his findings. The details of his success are left to the flow of the plot, but can often increase a merchant-mage's Resources Background over time. (But *not* without spending experience points — this is a plot device, not a freebie!)

[Unless the Floreatus attempts very specific predictions, this working remains casual; it does, however, require extended roll and very large amounts of successes.]

The Hero's Challenge (•• Mind)

Faced with numerous inferior opponents, the expert swordsman has a problem; he might be better than any one of them, but he can be cut down by weight of numbers. Fortunately, human nature allows him an out: Taunting his opponents, the hero pauses to challenge their masculinity (and weave this enchantment, too). Not being especially bright, the foes attack him head-on, one at a time. Now the swordsman only has to worry about his arms growing tired....

[Mind magick sends out a simple impulse to "fight fair, you cowards!" A character entering a room full of foes and issuing a witty challenge has time to weave this effect carefully, but someone in more of a hurry may well have to "fast-cast." (See the rulebook's Magick Difficulties Chart.) At least two successes are needed to have the desired effect on the character's enemies.

If he's facing "blade fodder," the character's difficulty is usually 4; if his opponents are more competent, the difficulty is the Willpower of the leading attacker. If an attacker decides "This is stupid!" a successful Willpower roll can overcome the spell. Hence, this is a good trick to play on nameless guardsmen, and damned near suicidal to attempt with major villains.]

Horsemaster's Bidding (•• Mind)

In a world where horses are the swiftest form of transportation, an *obedient* horse can be a critical advantage. Thus, a Floreatus who studies both horsemanship and the mind learns how to influence a riding beast's intellect. With a word or whistle, the horseman can calm a nervous steed, summon her from afar, or send an opponent's mount skittering nervously away. Generally, no one considers such skills strange, especially not if the magus is renowned for his equestrian talents.

[Again, a simple Mind nudge sends the command. Normally, a horse is inclined to agree, and no roll is

necessary. If the steed is being forced to do something she *doesn't* want to do (like betray her old rider), the magus rolls against the horse's Willpower (often 3, possibly higher. A really complicated command might require two successes or more, but most stunts are pretty straightforward.)

[Such effects are generally casual, especially if the Floreatus has had time to get to know the horse. Of course, calling a strange horse swiftly and without obvious means is wildly vain.]

Luster (•• Matter or •• Forces; may add •• or ••• Mind)

A simple trick of the sort that gives merchants a bad reputation! Using basic alchemy, fine tools and special polishes, plus Enlightened knowledge, the Floreatus makes an inanimate object (perhaps a gemstone, some piece of metal, or a work of art) look remarkably valuable... for a while, at least. Eventually, the **Luster** fades and the customer is left with something somewhat less than what he paid for.

[Matter can be used to transmute a substance — or at least its surface appearance; Forces can give something a dazzling sheen and sparkle. With a bit of Mind, the seller can impress everyone who sees the item, although some Floreati would call this a cheap stunt. Making something look better because it is better (at least for a while) shows that you understand what makes a thing desirable.

[A variation uses Mind 3 to discover something the buyer *really* wants to have, then employs Matter to create a facsimile of that item. Either way, the Floreatus can sell the object for two or three times its normal worth — sometimes more. When in doubt, assume the value doubles for every success rolled. Although this working is usually casual (unless it's done right in front of someone), the difficulty is the buyer's Perception + Awareness or Occult; thus, a common person may be easily deceived, but a magus or wise patron will not.

[The **Luster** usually lasts for the usual duration (see that chart in the rulebook). Eventually, the magick will fade and the item will return to its old state. By that time, the seller may want to be very far away...]

Monarch's Friend (•• Matter, • Prime; sometimes with ••• Forces, •• Prime)

Pity the poor monarch. Everyone's always trying to get her out of the way, often permanently. To ward off poison and magickal traps, a wise liege has a house sorcerer or two acting as her bodyguards. This enchantment, conceived long ago in the halls of Byzantium (or possibly even in Egypt), detects envenomed food and drink, and sometimes causes it to blaze brightly for everyone to see.

To employ this charm, the magus sprinkles herbs or jewel-dust across a suspicious surface, views it through special lenses, or mixes it with a specially prepared powder.

Like poison itself, this spell has many different variations, but one dominant effect.

[Matter detects either mundane or magickal poison; Prime 1 picks out traces of magickal traps and venoms. The Forces 3/ Prime 2 variation exposes the trap with a display of fiery colors. Each spell pits the sorcerer's Arete against the poison's virulence:

Difficulty	Poison
5	Powerful mundane toxin
6	Subtle mundane toxin
7	Powerful magickal toxin
8	Subtle magickal toxin

[Merely detecting the poison is casual; making it flare up is, of course, vain. This spell does not dilute the toxin in any way.]

Chain of Whispers (••• Mind, •• Connection)

This vicious but useful trick creates and spreads rumors at frightening speed. Essentially, the courtier tells something (true or otherwise) to a "confidante," and begs her not to spread the word. Meanwhile, a planted suggestion urges her to tell as many people as possible — and urges *them* to tell as many people as possible. And so on, and so on, and so on....

[The rumor is, in fact, the spell itself. Anyone who hears it will feel driven to repeat it. Once the rumor has been told, the *magickal* compulsion to spread the **Whispers** passes to the next person; the mundane rumor lasts as long as the hearer believes it, and the enchantment passes to two people per success. Although the magick itself is fairly weak, the natural human inclination to gossip can make this spell last a very long time.

[Unless the rumor is patently absurd and clearly treasonous ("King Henry is an *ape-buggering pouf*..."), this spell is casual. A character who tries to resist the urge to spread the rumor can keep silent, provided she makes a simple Willpower roll. Most people won't bother, though — especially in court, most people love to spread a secret.]

False Witness (••• Mind)

With a few carefully chosen words and a mental push, a courtier-magus can plant an image of something that never really occurred in her subject's mind. Suddenly, the Lord Chamberlain actually believes that he's *personally* seen King Henry buggering apes! Combined with the **Chain of Whispers**, this spell can have *severe* social repercussions....

[A successful Arete roll with the Target's Willpower as its difficulty will plant a false image in the subject's mind. How he reacts to that image is up to him, but unless it's utterly impossible ("I couldn't have seen King Henry buggering apes! I was in France when that occurred!"), he'll probably accept it as valid. A failed roll indicates that something was

ITEM, THIRD: HEARTS AND BLADES

wrong with the image (“*That doesn’t look like King Henry...*”), while a botch tips the subject off to the lie — and the enchantment. This, too, can have severe repercussions... for the magus!

Witch’s Diplomacy (••• Life, •• Matter; sometimes used with other Spheres — see below)

Courtiers and witches are renowned for their poisonous habits. With a vile mixture of herbs, venoms and sorcerous wiles, this working allows a would-be assassin to create a deadly toxin, impregnate some fluid or object with it, and inflict some doom upon the person who imbibes it.

Naturally, many variations of this curse exist. A simple version simply harms the victim physically. Other variations conceal the toxin, drive the victim insane; turn everything that touches the poison into *more* poison, transform a living person into stone, allow other people to sample the toxin without harm, or delay the effects of the poison until after a certain time has elapsed. Despite the grisly penalties for poisoning, some folk are renowned for their expertise, or pride themselves on imaginative variations on a theme.

[Matter 2 lets the caster set the Life Effect into an inanimate object or fluid. The poison itself can take all kinds of forms, including:

- Physical harm (aggravated Life-based damage; requires Life 3)
- Burning (aggravated Forces magick damage; requires Life 3 + Forces 3)
- Sleep (lasts normal spell duration; requires Life 3)
- Deep slumber (lasts Time magick duration; requires Life 3 + Time 3)
- Insanity (as “sleep” or “slumber”; requires Life 3 + Mind 3, or Life 3 + Mind 3 + Time 3)
- Flesh into stone or other matter (lasts normal duration; requires Life + Matter 3. A longer version incorporates Time 3, also.)
- Work only against a certain person (requires Life 3)
- Work only after a set time has elapsed (requires other appropriate Spheres + Time 3)
- Turn other materials into poison (requires Life 3 + Matter 3, plus other appropriate Spheres)
- Conceal poison from detection (requires Life 3 + Mind 3, Prime 3, or both)

Normally, a victim should be allowed to soak the damage from the toxin if he makes a successful Stamina roll, difficulty 8. Because the poison is magickal, he might even be able to use counter-magick against it, provides *he knows about the poison before he imbibes it*. (Afterward, it’s a tad late....) In most cases, the Merit: *Poison Resistance* is useless against this spell, although the Storyteller may grant an exception.

A character who wants to use this spell must first possess the Knowledge: *Poison*. After preparing the ingredients (a chore in itself), the assassin makes her Arete roll. This may be an extended roll, but it should generally be limited to three tries (three being the magic number; again, this is Storyteller’s discretion). Given the prevalence of poison in this setting, the difficulty is usually 6; really spectacular venoms, like fire and petrification, would be difficulty 8, and earn the poison-brewer a point or two of Scourge at the time of brewing.

Unless Prime has been used to cover mystick traces, a magickal poison is rather obvious to someone using Prime 1 or Matter 1 to detect toxins. (Knowing this, wizardly assassins often brew Prime into concoctions they plan to use against other magi.) For further details about poisons, see the rulebook, pp. 201-202, 206-207.

Gifts of the Ixos

In addition to a host of mundane skills (in game terms, Climbing, Disguise, Herbalism, Stealth and Subterfuge), the fabled Ixos possessed several mystick secrets. Three of these — illusion, shape-shifting and invisibility — are standard wizardly feats, and are described in the rulebook. Three, however, are worth describing:

The Silent Circle (•• Forces)

With a whispered invocation and a sprinkling of grave dust, a Ksirafai can mute all sounds within a small radius, and deepen the shadows within that same area.

[A simple Forces spell dampens (but does not dispel) sound and illumination within a perfect circle. The area of this Circle expands 10’ for each success rolled. Under the right conditions (fog, nighttime, a storm) the spell is casual; if light pales and sounds fade in open sunshine, however, some vain magick is certainly at work!]

Morpheus’ Kiss (•• Life, •• Mind)

At night, all watchmen secretly want to sleep. By calling upon this hidden desire, a Razor can lull a guard into the slumber he so desperately craves. To invoke that spell, the Ksirafai taps three times on her own head, repeats “sleep, sleep, sleep,” each time, then blows a kiss at the watchman. Unless he’s stout of heart, he’ll do as his body (and the Razor) demands.

[By appealing to both mind and body, the Razor *inspires* sleep rather than inducing it. The difficulty of the roll is the watchman’s Willpower; if the roll succeeds, the watchman gradually (*not suddenly!*) drifts off and slowly collapses. This spell is casual, does not inflict lasting harm, and lasts for the usual magick duration.]

Death’s Passage (•••• Entropy, ••• Spirit, •• Life)

In return for the cowardly slaying of Achilles, Hermes granted Odysseus a grim favor: He and his men would be able to step out of this world, but in so doing they would



cross the threshold of death... and bring a bit of it back with them to the mortal world. Some say the melancholy that haunted Odysseus for the rest of his life could be traced back to the dust of Hades he forever carried on his feet... and soul.

Despite the sinister overtones of this "gift," some Razors use it to cross through barriers in the mortal world. Entering a trance, the Ksirafai slows down her life-force, then disappears from the living world and reappears in the Shadowlands. Philosopher-scientists who know about this macabre trick speculate that the Razor actually sets her soul wandering while her body stays behind. Regardless, the act has dire ramifications. Death-taint (also called *Jhor*) settles in every time the Razor steps across Hades' threshold. In time, she may come to love death, even though her body still dwells in the living world.

[In game terms, this is a shadow-walk into the Underworld (see the rulebook, pp. 211). When (and if!) she returns, the Ksirafai will probably bear a bit of *Jhor* back with her (see the rulebook, p. 236). This probably explains a lot about the Razors' ghostly, morbid reputation.]

Enlightened Fencing Techniques

A slender sword that can kill more quickly and efficiently than a massive steel chopper certainly seems magical

enough. And while most of the refinements of this fighting art are quite mundane (if spectacular), a few appear to be quite supernatural....

Blade Sense (• Connection, • Matter, • Life)

An Enlightened fencer can use her skills to improve her chances in a confused melee. Becoming "one with the blade" and attuning herself to the exigencies of combat, the Floreatus enters a half-trance and expands her senses far beyond normal limitations. Thus attuned, she can spot foes out of normal sight, swat opponents' blades aside, anticipate their moves, and (to some degree) even fight in total darkness.

[A combination of extra-spatial awareness (Connection), physical precision (Life) and a bond within the blade (Matter) allows the fencer to sense nearby opponents, read their impulses (*not* deep thoughts!), and strike with great effect. In game terms, this comes across as a combat sense that notes ambushes and lets the Floreatus sidestep penalties for being blinded.

[At the Storyteller's discretion, **Blade Sense** might also allow the player to reduce the difficulty of her next attack or parry roll by 1 for every two successes. This option, however, might be too ripe for abuse, and the Storyteller may ignore it if he pleases.]

The Piercing Thrust (• Entropy, Life or Matter; sometimes with •• Entropy)

Well-armored fighters sometimes laugh at fencers, thinking that no lightweight blade can pierce a good plate corselet. An Enlightened fencer can show how wrong they are....

[Like the Artisan technique known as **Splitting the Cuirass** (see *The Artisans Handbook*, p. 48), this **Thrust** uses perception magicks to detect weak points. Matter 1 serves against man-made armor; Life 1 achieves the same effect against natural protections (like an animal's thick hide); and Entropy 1 works against any defense.

[Each success on the Arete roll reduces the armor's protection value by one. The fencer strikes at +2 difficulty, however, because she must target a very specific point. An additional Entropy 2 spell can negate this penalty, as it guides the fencer's blade with uncanny precision.

[In most cases, this maneuver is casual, if a trifle unsettling. A blade that pierces solid stone or cast iron, on the other hand, is remarkably vain.]

Beat of the Blade (••• Time)

A true expert seemingly transcends normal conceptions of time, striking twice or thrice before an opponent can even respond. In such a case, the fencer's sword moves swiftly — sometimes faster than the eye or arm can follow.

[This is a typical, if Daedalean, example of **Spinning the Wheel** (see the rulebook, p.254). Although such inhuman speeds are usually quite vain, a noted fencer can make the Effect seem casual — almost uncanny, but not quite unbelievable.]

The Fruits of Desire

Among other evils caused by being disarmed, it renders you contemptible. It is not reasonable to suppose that one who is armed will obey willingly one who is unarmed; or that any unarmed man will remain safe among armed servants.

— Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Gareth sat patiently on a low stool, his sword in its scabbard across his knees. Nearby, Maria murmured a little and shifted position. Finally, she was waking up.

Her eyes opened, and she saw Gareth by her side. He offered her a cup. She took it and drank, then frowned — only a little, he judged with relief, and not in pain.

"Water?" she asked faintly.

"Pure water, and nothing else. My word on that; none purer."

She shook her head to clear it, and raised herself, spilling a little from the cup. "Ah," she said, "none purer indeed. Is that lawful?"

He shrugged sheepishly. "I persuaded the good father that we had just cause." The bodyguard sheathed the sword he had drawn before approaching her. "And forgive me the test, but..."

"Yes," she said, leaning up. "I can drink your holy water without pain."

"Then," said Gareth, "we have much work to do. And quickly, too."

Maria smiled faintly, unkindly. "So you've chosen to betray your master, then?"

"Oh, no," he countered. "Quite the opposite. Although I set myself against him now, I'm acting in his true best interests." The guard seemed weary, but sincere.

The witch noted the haunted look in Gareth's eyes. "So he is damned, then."

Gareth sighed. "More deeply than he himself could realize."

"And why is this my concern?"

"Because," he replied, "the fruits of his damnation have grown in your own sacred gardens."

She bolted upright. "The plague? That's his doing?"

"Not his," Gareth demurred. He didn't like the witch's expression, but couldn't really blame her, either. "Another serpent has poisoned him. Do you want to hear more?"

Maria grimaced. "I do. Tell me everything..."

All's Fair...

While the Floreatus recognizes that power comes from command of the self, she must also accept that the self exists in the world. Thus, any resource that allows the courtier to get an edge in that world is worthwhile, even if other folk look askance at the "resource" in question. To that end, a Floreatus employs money, gossip, charisma, gamesmanship, mechanical devices, prayer, and even sorcery to achieve her desired ends. This is an Art for rich merchants, after all, and nearly any trick is fair.

Enlightened courtiers wield all manner of tools and devices, both mundane and uncanny. Anything from perfumes and subtle gestures to cash, brute force, or even sorcery — the advantages employed by courtly magicians are legion. Like all other things courtly, however, they're most often subtle. If a courtier wheeled in a gigantic killing machine or bubbling cauldron — well, people might talk, you know...

New and Increased Background Traits

As they're quick to remind anyone who steps out of line, courtiers and merchant-princes are *not* ordinary people! Between his power, money and influence, a single duke or moneylender can command resources that many a wizard would envy. Hence, certain rich or royal characters might,

at *Storyteller's discretion*, be able to purchase very high or different Background Traits than those presented in the main rulebook.

To reflect the loyalty and wealth certain personages possess, a handful of Backgrounds (Allies, Influence, Library and Resources) may be raised to levels over 5. However, we recommend that no single player's character be allowed to purchase any Background at a level of 8 or higher — very few people in the world have this kind of influence, and it should be reserved for emperors, kings, and merchant lords like Jakob Fugger.

Note also that these "court Backgrounds" may well be tied to the Merit: *Title*, or to significant honors in the mortal world. A character (Storyteller or player) who falls from grace will probably lose these "perks" in the bargain.

Allies

A courtier makes a many friends. Although most of them will fall into the "Retinue" category when and if they figure into a character's Backgrounds at all, a handful of powerful friends (including night-folk or other wizards) might be a bit more helpful than that. Naturally, these august companions must be placated and rewarded in the usual ways, and their loyalty dwindles as their numbers increase. But when a pack of werebeasts or mad sorcerers are pounding at the door, however, it's nice to have friends by your side....

- • Six moderately powerful Allies, many "lesser" sidekicks, or three truly powerful ones.
- •• Seven boon companions, a pack of un derlings, or a handful of deadly friends.
- ••• Eight Allies, a small army of followers, or a half-dozen magi or night-folk.
- •••• Nine true and loyal friends, a small peasant militia, or a dozen *very* dangerous beings.
- ••••• 10 good, stout fellows, several hundred followers, or a variety of powerful wizards or other arcane beasts.

Influence (Increased)

The halls of power crawl with people whose influence outstrips the average lord or lady. Such folk can affect whole kingdoms with their whims, or affect affairs in distant lands with a modicum of effort. Naturally, truly prodigious feats of dominion require time, intermediaries, and often travel — you can't just pick up a phone in 1500! And when political schemes go awry, the consequences can be disastrous: war and accusations of treason can follow close behind a failed or botched Manipulation + Influence roll!

- • When you speak, the upper nobility listens closely.
- •• You're one of the most influential people in your kingdom, and can exert influence *outside* your realm, too.
- ••• Kings and queens respect you; you might even be one of them!
- •••• You have the full attention of an emperor or the Pope.
- ••••• You *are* an emperor or the Pope!

Library (Increased)

While books remain a rarity in this world, the combination of wealth, access, printing presses and increased literacy allows some few people to assemble archives of grand scope. Such libraries take up a lot of room, and require constant maintenance — moths, rats and rot take a high toll on written works these days! Several characters who wish to assemble a Library of grand proportions can combine this Background Trait.

- • A large archive, like that of a university or rich palace.
- •• An extensive college library, or a vast personal one.
- ••• A truly impressive collection of lore both earthly and Otherworldly.
- •••• One of the greatest assemblies of wisdom known to man.
- ••••• A legendary archive, like Doissestep or the Vatican.

Patron

In a world of mentors and apprentices, many people depend on sponsors. Any artist or artisan understands the necessity of patronage — of a person who supports his work with ready cash, prestige and attention. With the proper connections, you can meet important people, make a decent living, and achieve greater masterworks and fame.

In the Renaissance, this relationship is quite two-sided; a rich yet uncouth nobleman can make himself seem far more respectable if he sponsors a great artist, and he can usually get expensive "favors" (say, a new fresco for the villa) for a pittance! And so, many people in and around courts seek a patron who will appreciate their work enough to pay for it.

In game terms, a Patron is a powerful Storyteller character who decides, for reasons of his own, to sponsor a lesser character. This sponsorship could be social ("I'll introduce you — just smile and nod..."); political ("Yes, I can get you an audience with the King."); financial ("What do you need?"); even magical ("I have found a tutor for you among the Jerbiton Order."). Unlike a Mentor, this character does

not actually teach his beneficiary, and often prefers to keep a slight distance between them. Still, he will want payment for his largesse — often loyalty, artwork, services and bragging rights at the very least. Abuse his generosity, however, and things could grow quite difficult for you....

- A mysterious occasional benefactor.
- A fond but distant sponsor.
- An influential courtier or banker who often supplies whatever it is you need.
- A powerful person who smoothes many roads for you.
- A wealthy patron dedicated (at least for the moment) to your well-being.

Resources (Increased)

As the Rebirth blooms and trade blossoms, some lucky few accumulate vast wealth — wealth enough to buy castles, ships and even (it is said) Pontiffs. Granted, *very* few players' characters should ever come into this kind of fortune, but they might well cross paths (or swords) with a merchant-prince or Grand Financier with a Midas touch and a grasping heart.

- Prosperous noble; you have fine lands, many vassals, and a grand keep or manor to call home.
- Rich tradesmaster; your wealth and lands are the envy of many a courtier.
- High lord or lady; a prosperous realm keeps you in splendid finery. You can afford most of what the world has to offer.
- Merchant-prince; you own several ships, villas, people, and perhaps a palace or two.
- Wealthy Sovereign or grand banker; you could spend money on an epic scale and never deplete your treasury.

Retinue

In this age, a leader of men is often master of them, too. Thus, any gentleman or lady worth talking to has a bevy of attendants — dogsbodies, ladies-in-waiting, grooms, messengers, etc. — who meet that personage's mundane needs. Although the members of this Retinue are not really warriors (loyal fighters constitute the Allies Background), they're very useful folk to have around.

In story terms, these characters nurse children, receive messages, balance accounts, clean manors, attend to guests, and otherwise leave their master or mistress free for more important chores. In game terms, they constitute a small group of loyal servants who have useful (if minor) skills like Crafts, Riding, Seneschal and so forth, usually at one to three dots. Although characters in their own right (with all

that this entails; see the Allies and Mentor Backgrounds), these servants attend you at home, in court, or on the road (should you choose to take them "on progress"). When shelters need to be built, meals prepared, and so on, the servants, not the master, usually do the work.

Retinues, of course, do not come cheaply; the servants must be fed, clothed, cared for, and housed. In game terms, a character cannot have a Retinue rating higher than her Resources Trait, nor can she have the Background at all if she has Resources 1, 2 or 3. If the character is open about her magickal talents or superior science, then members of the Retinue do not count as "witnesses" when she employs vain Arts. Servants tend to talk, however, and one *might* let something slip if he knows he's working for a witch....

For the most part, a Retinue is made up of characters who have some notable but not exceptional skills. In short, they cannot have Abilities Traits that exceed 3, or Attributes that exceed 4, or more than three Traits of 3 or higher. These are the proverbial "normal folks" who happen to be good at one or two specific things. Exceptional "specialists," on the other hand, can be bought for a higher Background cost. These characters can be the equal of a *starting* player's character, although they *cannot* have any form of mystic power (magick, Disciplines, Hedge Magic, etc.) Really exceptional retainers, like Walsingham in the film *Elizabeth* or Lady de Winter in *The Three Musketeers*, count as Allies, not as parts of a Retinue. They must be "purchased" separately, and do not constitute part of this loyal body of servants.

Oh, and yes, these characters *are* usually loyal. They might be hirelings, devotees, church members, relatives, lovers, subjects, ancestral servants, or whatever seems most appropriate, but they'll usually have your best interests at heart. Although these people might be tempted or forced to betray their master, they generally tend to be honest folk, so long as they're well-treated and appreciated. They're rarely fanatics, however — if the shit starts flying, they'll be the first ones out the door... or dead. And that's something that you, as their master, should take seriously. If these servants meet horrible deaths, the Background rating falls accordingly. Unless you're truly rich (and even if you are), it's pretty hard to hire good help if your servants tend to croak!

Note: Players familiar with **Mage: The Ascension** may notice that this Background roughly corresponds to the Background: *Backup* described in the **Guide to the Technocracy**. However, due to the difference between the feudal mindset (under which people exist to serve their betters) and the modern one, the number of available retainers in this setting is correspondingly larger.

- Four basic retainers, or one specialist.
- Eight basic retainers, or two specialists.
- 12 basic retainers, or three specialists.
- 16 basic retainers, or four specialists.

- 20 basic retainers, or five specialists.
- 30 basic retainers, or six specialists.
- 40 basic retainers, or seven specialists.
- 50 basic retainers, or eight specialists.
- 60 basic retainers, or nine specialists.
- 70 basic retainers, or 10 specialists.

Minor Devices and Helpful Tools

In the tangled world of espionage, a courtier needs all manner of tricks to accomplish her mission. Below, we offer a banquet of odd devices and helpful ruses that any swashbuckler can employ.

Generally, these tools fall into the category that *The Artisans Handbook* defines as “Unusual Devices”: they’re unusual by the standards of the age, but not so advanced that it would take a magus or Enlightened craftsman to make one. Such devices *are* rather expensive, though, and a character would need three dots or more in an appropriate Trait (usually Crafts, although Invention helps as well) before she could create one. Hence, these “tricks of the trade” are often hard to obtain unless you’ve got a wealthy patron, a few dots in Resources, or an arcane association behind you.

Swashbuckling magi and Daedaleans can use these tools and tricks as foci for magickal workings, too. A spring-sheath, for example, can let a Craftmason shoot a last-minute Forces attack (a dagger) out of his sleeve. In time, such tricks will be known as “coincidental magick” (as in “*Wow! What a coincidence I was wearing my dagger-sheath in my sleeve!*”). These days, it’s well-known that courtiers have such things at their disposal, so it’s perfectly reasonable to assume that a swashbuckler’s trick, not “magick,” is behind the sudden appearance of a dagger or draught of poison. Just the same, a courtier had better actually *have* such an item on her person if she doesn’t want to look like some kind of witch....

Breakaway Skirts

Female fashion is often very impressive and stylish, but complicated garb can get in the way when matters become... less than subtle. Some female Floreati thus make a point of acquiring specially-made skirts and farthingales that can be discarded with a swift gesture.

In game terms, a tailor or dressmaker must make such garments with a rating of at least 3 in the appropriate Craft. Discarding the skirts neatly requires a Dexterity roll (difficulty 7), and probably leaves the wearer scandalously underdressed by most contemporary standards — although if the move is executed with panache, it may win her a round of applause.

Brigantine Armor

Faced with the perpetual danger of unexpected daggers and knives, wealthy and powerful folk purchase armor that provides a useful level of protection with some degree of comfort and discretion. This “brigantine” armor is simply cloth or lightweight leather with metal plates or rings attached, or occasionally sewn inside the garment for concealment’s sake.

A decent brigantine shirt, combined with otherwise ordinary clothes (including leather boots and so on), appears to be a slightly bulky suit of rich but unremarkable clothes. In game terms, such protection is essentially Light Armor (protection 2, penalty 0). Slightly lighter versions (protection 1) provide a more discreet, but still worthwhile, level of protection in civilian life. Enlightened courtiers sometimes have special suits tailored with Matter Arts; these suits can be quite strong (protection 4 or 5), but no heavier than a thick set of clothing.

Climbing Gear

Getting in and out of high places requires the Athletics or Climbing Traits; doing so *safely* often demands artificial aids. Ropes and grapnels are commonplace enough, though players should note that hemp ropes aren’t as quite tough as modern synthetic fibers; the risk of having a rope break should always feel quite real. A grapnel can be thrown over a wall with a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll, with the difficulty depending on the circumstances of the throw and the height of the wall. Grapnels can be fired from cross-bows, too, but either the grapnel or the bow should be specially made or adapted for the purpose — ideally both. (Here’s where Crafts [weaponsmith], Invention, or a nearby Artificer can come in handy....)

Although ninja-like cat’s claws are not really period for Renaissance Europe, an artisan or Ksirafai can come up with all kinds of interesting innovations that look *remarkably* like such devices. In game terms, a set of climbing claws grants a character an effective Climbing Skill of 2, or adds two to her Climbing Dice Pool. Even so, she’ll still have to use the damned things, and castle walls are pretty steep....

Codes and Ciphers

If you have something you don’t want other people to read, it’s a good idea to make it illegible to all but a chosen few. A common element of intrigue, the code is an idea rather than an object, though some physical devices — such as “code wheels” — may be used to write or decipher code.

Although coding techniques go back to the ancient world, those used by mundane Renaissance spies and diplomats are very simple by later standards. Most codes involve basic letter-substitution systems, which can be defeated by

“frequency analysis” techniques based on the fact that the most common letters in a message are likely to correspond to the most common letters in the language.

(Frequency analysis was developed by Muslim scholars centuries ago; by the Renaissance, it’s well known in Europe. In 1470, Leon Battista Alberti, a brilliant artist, architect, and all-round Renaissance Man, and possible High Artisan, suggests more complex codes that can defeat frequency analysis. Soon afterward, his ideas will be developed by others, including Johannes Trithemius, a scholar-abbot whose many interests include reconciling magic with theology; Giambattista della Porta, a philosopher whose scientific studies would seem quite Daedalean if it were not for his obsession with, again, magic; and eventually Blaise de Vigenère, whose 1586 book on the subject will become the basis for much cryptography through to Victorian times.)

Other, more esoteric encryption methods involve alchemical, religious or artistic symbolism, verses from Scripture (including arcane apocrypha and “heretical” scriptures like the Koran and Torah), and secret languages developed especially for code. Even then, though, the code depends on some obscure bit of information. If a clever third party had that same information, he could unravel the code with relatively little trouble.

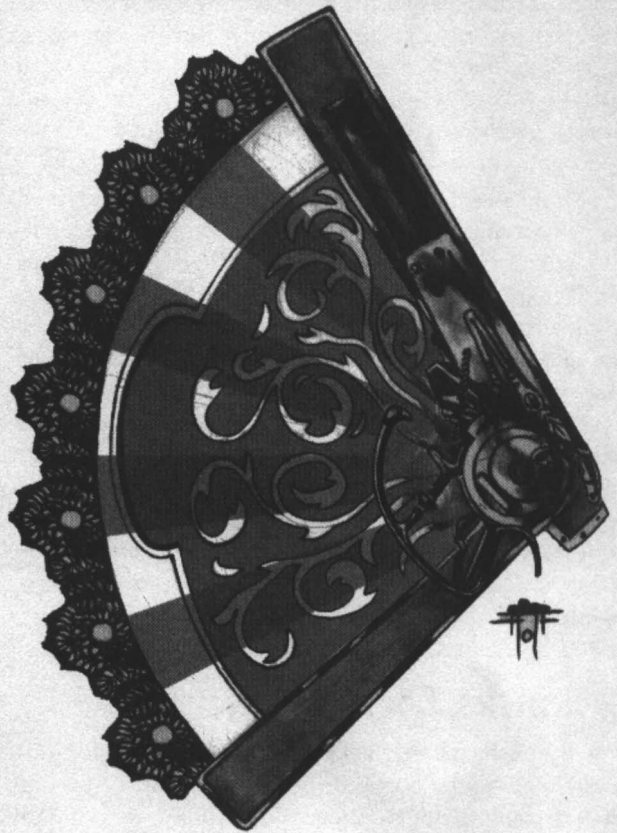
In game terms, a character with the right Knowledge Traits (often Enigmas, Metaphysics, Occult, Science [mathematics], Secret Code Language, Symbolism, or Theology) can puzzle out a code with an Intelligence + (appropriate Knowledge) roll. In most cases, this will demand an extended roll and a fairly high difficulty, but nobody said espionage was easy.

Messages between the Awakened are often far better protected. Aside from the various secret languages used by different factions, spirits messengers, and Mind-based magicks that lock messages away in an emissary’s memory, scholars like the Craftsmasons, Hermetics and Artificers hide their messages within private symbolism, arcane allusions and references, and obscure systems of mathematics.

Defeating such ciphers demands hours, days or weeks of work, successful use of both Enigmas and Symbolism, and quite often magick. (Needless to say, the Ksirafai have a few philosophers whose chief purpose in life is precisely this work, although gaining their assistance, even with proper authority and the use of the Viasilicos system, often takes a while.) In game terms, finding some crucial key to unlock an enemy’s code can provide a gripping (if unconventional) plot hook for a *Sorcerers Crusade* adventure.

Concealed Guns

An additional advantage of wheellock firearms allows small guns to be incorporated into other objects. A lighted match attached to a gun will always be a nuisance, but a



small, spring-loaded mechanism can be hidden away, and also kept ready for firing for hours at a time.

Of course, wheellock guns are rarities until late in the *Sorcerers Crusade* period, and making one small enough to be hidden in a hand-held object yet powerful enough to be useful is damnably hard for a gunsmith of the era. Such devices demand Enlightened craftsmanship before the 16th century, and they’ll *always* be very expensive. Concealed guns are usually unreliable, too, and a little dangerous to the gunman, besides. Still, they *can* provide a handy surprise.

A gun small enough to fit into the hilt of a two-handed sword, the boss of a buckler, or the side of a small traveling box would have attributes around the following:

Difficulty 7 (possibly higher), Damage 3-5, Concealment C, Strength 2, Range 20.

Reloading is likely to be a lengthy matter of disassembly — these are intended as one-shot last resorts, after all — but the neatest guns can be reloaded in about four turns (and hence have a nominal Rate of 1/5).

Forged Papers

As literacy and written contracts become more and more important, the fine “art” of forgery comes into its own. Forgery is an old criminal skill, but it was once limited to government spies and wealthy aristocrats who could afford lawsuits and written contracts. A more literate society,

though, can produce more forgers... and a bigger market for them. Forgery doesn't always involve writing, of course. Many legal documents and government letters are validated by wax seals — marks made by a signet ring pressed into hot beeswax. The man or woman who can counterfeit a document or seal will have many customers indeed.

Mundane forgery involves the proper tools (good parchment, a command of the language, and so on) and a Manipulation + Larceny roll. (Subterfuge is *not* appropriate; it helps you tell lies, not fake legal documents.) An Awakened forger can use Matter magicks to shape a perfect reproduction of something, Mind magicks to remember what the original looked like, and perhaps even more powerful Mind Effects to make someone believe that the forgery is genuine. Spotting a faked document usually involves a Perception + Law or Politics roll; it *does* help, though, if the character who's noting the counterfeit is familiar with what he's *supposed* to be receiving. The average royal guard won't know a faked pardon from a parsnip, although a sheriff who's known the duke since boyhood would probably note the fake immediately.

Lockpicks, Locks and Keys

Although locks in the Dark Fantastic period are primitive by later standards, they're improving rapidly, especially when Artificers design them. Defeating a lock usually demands a couple of appropriate tools, which may or may not pass as ordinary craftsman's equipment; these lockpicks are fairly inexpensive, although they may be hard to acquire in a hurry. Improvised tools, such as slim daggers and scraps of wire, may be used as well, but they're not well-suited for the job.

Picking a lock demands a roll based on Dexterity + Crafts (locksmith), Invention, or Larceny. Base difficulties range from 6 (for a cheap or primitive lock) to 10 (for a High Artisan locksmith's work). Awkward tools (like a dagger), or bad conditions (darkness, rust, rain, etc.) may raise the difficulty by 2 or more. Two or more successes are usually required (storytellers *might* let them be accumulated over multiple attempts, unless the lock incorporates spring-based mechanisms to foil slow workers), and a botch usually jams the lock for good.

Many magician-spies employ "skeleton keys" or magickal lockpicks that allow them to pop most any lock. In game terms, such an item might be either a Magickal Treasure (Level 2; uses a Matter 2 or Entropy 2 Effect to spring the lock), or a focus for similar magick. In either case, the spy's player rolls his Arete (or the Treasure's "Arete," if he's using one) against the difficulty of the lock. Yes, this means an Artificer's lock is *still* hard to pick with a magickal key. That's life.

Miniature Crossbows

The basic form of the crossbow can be applied to anything from a siege engine down to the one-handed devices favored by some Craftsmen — and even smaller. However, anything that's too small has the obvious drawback of not doing very much damage. On the other hand, spies and assassins have uses even for miniature weapons — such as delivering messages, drugs and poisons.

In game terms, a palm-sized crossbow is perfectly mundane (non-magickal), and has the following attributes:

Difficulty 7, Damage 1, Rate 1/2, Strength 1, Range 10

The weapon can be concealed under virtually any clothes, or in a large pouch.



Poison Rings

Another old trick that still serves is the ring (or occasionally other item of jewelry) that incorporates a small compartment containing a single dose of some dubious preparation. Such "Borgia signets" are technically illegal in most courts, but they're popular nonetheless. Skilled (and discreet) jewelers make poison rings for wealthy patrons of all persuasions. Typically, a large stone or engraved design hides a hollow chamber inside the bauble. Given a chance, the wearer can pop the ring open, dump its contents, and close the thing up again before anyone notices the trick. (See "Poisoning" on the Dramatic Systems Chart, p. 191 in the rulebook.)

An Enlightened variation on the poison ring includes a tiny needle treated with venom. The wearer triggers the barb, then "accidentally" brushes her target with the point.

Although such rings deliver miniscule amounts of poison, that tiny dose can be enough for certain magician-spies. Naturally, an Awakened assassin doesn't have to rely on rings or jewelry to smuggle poison into court. Any kind of tempting foodstuff will do nicely (apples, anyone...?).

Spring-Sheaths

If discretion is the better part of valor, speed is often the better part of discretion. For those nasty moments when a single breath can mean the difference between a live courtier and crow's meat, some spies carry spring-loaded sheaths loaded with blades, quarrels and other helpful tools.

Spring-sheaths are rather gimmicky, rare and expensive. In game terms, the sheath is more or less a plot device — a cool gimmick that lets a spy keep one or two extra tricks hidden away. This, in turn, might grant him a surprise move in combat, or a fallback measure in desperate situations. Typically, a character can keep two spring-sheaths "loaded" until use. Obvious "ammunition" includes crossbow bolts (see above), juggling balls, lockpicks, poison vials, and daggers or punch-blades (treat as a dagger doing Strength + 2).

In most cases, a spring-sheath is easy to use: Pop the trigger, and your weapon's in hand. A bad fall or tricky situation (like trying to fire a quarrel at a nearby magus) might demand a Dexterity + Melee or Archery. If the roll fails, the weapon might miss its target — or the spring might go off by accident and *hit* its target! A botched roll indicates a jammed spring, or a weapon that fires off at precisely the *wrong* moment. How embarrassing...

Trick Jugs

Jugs, bottles and pitchers may be constructed with internal valves and divisions that allow a person to pour two or more different fluids from the same spout. Some containers have hidden catches that shift a valve; others pour first one liquid, then, after a pause, a second; still others switch if held in particular ways, or if poured fast or slow. Muslim craftsmen have been working on such designs for centuries, and have perfected a number of subtle, efficient tricks. Even in a well-designed container, though, a bit of mixing is inevitable; if one liquid is poisoned and the other is not, it's unwise to make the poison *too* potent....

Poisons and Drugs

Poisons (and less lethal concoctions) may be despised, but they're undeniably convenient at times when words or steel cannot serve. This is a field where mundane knowledge blends into sorcery. Even when the toxic ingredients themselves are not expensive, the skills to use them command a high price — understandably so, given the dreadful punishments meted out to suspected poisoners!

Plot and system details about this sadly common form of Renaissance "negotiation" are described in the rulebook, *The Sorcerers Crusade Companion*, and elsewhere in this supplement.

Folk Charms

In the Dark Fantastic world, mundane "magic amulets" and "lucky charms" are not only commonplace and widely trusted — sometimes they even work! Of course, these bits of "commonfolk magic" tend to be unreliable, but that's oftentimes better than nothing.

Such charms usually furnish protection (against magic, monsters, disease or bad luck), ward off hostile magick, or inspire feelings (like love, hatred, madness or tranquility) in another person. Although they're rarely made by Awakened or Enlightened folk, these lesser spells and talismans can be quite effective. Just as mundane armor may slow a magick sword or an Artificer's bullet, a simple peasant's amulet may stop a wizard's spell. It's unlikely, but it does happen.

Many commoners and courtiers visit the homes of "little old wise women," priests and "alchemists" who have no talent for True Magick, but who *do* know enough about legendry and the shadow world to craft effective folk charms. The ingredients of such charms tend to somewhat exotic, but cheap (or at least accessible) enough for mortals to afford. After all, the "recipes" for these charms were often created by simple folk with very few resources. Most folk charms employ the idea of sympathetic magic — bits of hair, blood, milk, dirt and so forth — to bind the talisman to the customer and her purpose... and to inspire the faith that might just lie at the real heart of the matter.

In game terms, these lesser workings are the "commonfolk magics" described in the rulebook (p. 267) and *Infernalism: The Path of Screams* (p. 77). Their effectiveness depends more on Storyteller whim than on solid game mechanics, but such charms can be used as ritual tools by Awakened characters, and often are. Common charms found in and around courts include:

- **Cures and Protections Against Disease:** In an era of plague and contagion, everyone wants to banish sickness. "Health spells" include garlic, gemstones, powdered herbs, burning incense or coal, and sometimes bird-like masks filled with medicinal herbs.

- **Protections Against Magic:** Rowan wood, coral, jet, gold and rubies supposedly drive away ill-willed magick, although holy water, prayers, and bells are rumored to crack the power of witchcraft, too.

- **Love Charms:** Thanks to common human weakness, there are *thousands* of recipes for love-charms and love-potions in circulation. Even in the modern age, people seem to be looking for that quick fix (can you say "Viagra"?). For the most part, these charms are fairly useless. Some, however, do appear to work, especially poppets and elixirs which incorporate vervain, marjoram, blood, hair, semen or clothing from the would-be lover.

- **Luck Charms:** Like love, luck is something for which mortals are all too willing to pay. Most charms offer a single, rather vague benefit — protection from some specific misfortune, survival in combat, financial prosperity — that a certain act of Storyteller fiat can accomplish. Typical Renaissance luck charms include golden trinkets, "lucky coins," prayers to various saints, dice carved from a rabbit's bones, or rowan-wood amulets.

Talismans and Machinae

Some gadgets are too bizarre or advanced for any Renaissance mortal to build or use. This does not, of course, keep an Enlightened courtier from toting a few Machinae around with her, provided the Devices are subtle, tasteful and portable enough for court.

Most Guildsmen and Ksirafai prefer to work with warm bodies rather than cold iron. Therefore, many swashbuckling Daedaleans purchase or commission their toys from Artificers, Cosians or Craftsmasons. (If you *have* the money, why not use it well?) Almost any one of the Devices described in **The Artisans Handbook** or the **Sorcerers Crusade** Appendix could show up in the hands of a courtier or Guildsman. Some, of course, are rather crass or cumbersome to carry around polite society, but even the heaviest gun or weirdest vehicle may have its place in a scheme of trade or espionage — and subtler creations such as Vap'rous Candles of Lethe or the Serpent Blade certainly fit in. However, there are other Devices that are *highly* appropriate in a court, and have been crafted for that arena....

•• Siren's Scent

Arete n/a, Quintessence 10, Cost 4

When this special concoction is applied to bare skin, an intoxicating blend of herbs mingles with a person's natural musks — to devastating effect. Despite its "generic name," this potion, salve, powder or perfume has literally hundreds of variants, from the cool musks used by English Guildsmen to the heady recipes favored by some Sahajiya.

[The Siren's Scent adds four dice to the character's Social Dice Pools. Once the mood sets in, both parties "follow their instincts" unless a Willpower roll (difficulty 7) breaks the spell. This sort of thing can get out of hand, of course — desire can explode into animal sex... or rape, while anger can inspire a brawl and intimidation results in hose-crapping terror.

[Each "Quintessence point" represents a single application of the Scent. Once they've all been used, the courtier must obtain a fresh batch of the stuff.]

•• Sword-Breaker

Arete 2, Quintessence 10, Cost 4

A fine broad-bladed saber or dagger of Daedalian craftsmanship, this weapon appears to a normal (if exceptional beautiful) blade. In the hands of a normal fencer, it strikes true enough and seems almost alive in its "owner's" hand. A Guildsman, however, knows the weapon's secret properties. With a touch, he can spring a hidden mechanism; three short, strong blades pop out of the edges of the sword, forming a trident-shape that radiates from the hilt outward. These additional edges not only cause greater wounds, they allow the fencer to capture and snap his opponent's sword. Simple, yet startlingly effective.

[The Sword-breaker is actually a refinement of a real-life (if often unreliable) weapon. Using it, a Guildsman can snag his rivals' blade with a successful Disarm maneuver. If the fencer rolls more than three successes, any non-magickal sword will snap off in the Sword-breaker's "trident." An enchanted sword, or one of Daedalian manufacture, requires a Quintessence point and at least four successes on the roll.

[In all other respects, the Sword-breaker is a rapier of especially fine craftsmanship. Until the hidden blades snap out, the weapon seems utterly mundane, unless it's examined with Prime sensory magick.]

••• The Thief's Claw

Arete 3, Quintessence 15, Cost 6

Oddly enough, this small but complex Device, made of wood, various alloys and several lodestones, looks nothing like a claw; the name refers to its function. This slender pick-and-mirror mechanism folds out into a dizzying array of probes, pins and keys. Using the principles of Connection, Entropy and Forces, an Enlightened spy can probe and manipulate the interior of mechanisms — often, but not always, locks and clockworks.

Essentially, this Device allows a character without the proper skills to inspect and spring small contraptions. It's neither big nor sturdy enough to sabotage a vehicle or war machine, but it can open almost any lock, and repair or damage a complex mechanism. The would-be thief sits



ITEM, THIRD: HEARTS AND BLADES

down, opens the Device, and picks through the gears until something gives. Once finished, she can fold the Claw back into itself, and proceed....

[Simply probing a mechanism costs no Quintessence, only time. Some tricky mechanisms may require a roll based on Intelligence + Invention or some appropriate Craft. (Of course, a competent locksmith will have no difficulty comprehending a standard type of lock.) Actually manipulating the mechanism (say, opening a lock) uses a point of Quintessence (which takes the form of attuned resonances in the lodestones), and may require an Intelligence + appropriate skill roll if the mechanism is especially complex.

[The strength of these Effects is limited to about finger-pressure, so the Claw cannot usually cause much damage (intentional or otherwise). The Device does not work on beings living, undead or otherwise.]

••• The Masquer's Grand Disguise Arete , Quintessence N/A, Cost

A sophisticated court sees numerous masked balls; some Floreati find ways to exploit this pageantry. With a clever, finely-crafted mask, the Daedalean strides into the crowd, impressive but effectively concealed. The true nature of the mask involves minor but subtly potent alchemical treatments. With but a simple change of mood or a mental shrug, the Floreatus can literally change the color and design of her mask. Although the shape of the mask cannot change, its hues and patterns slip between over a dozen different variations. Of course, our *courtesse* waits until she's out of sight before she alters her disguise. Once she does, however, she can appear to be someone else entirely. Some spies have whole costumes made this way. Although such garments are ruinously expensive, they can make a single person look like a dozen in a single night.

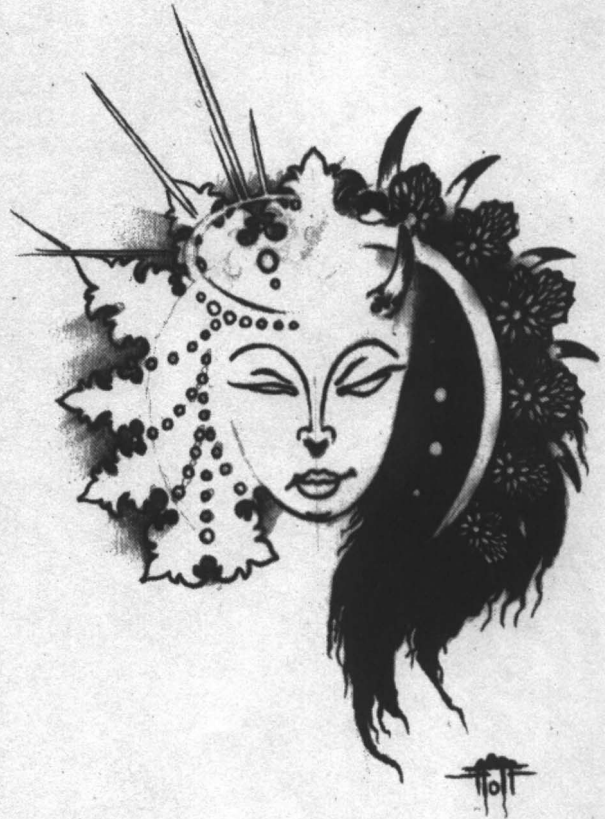
The Grand Disguise has other purposes, though. If the Floreatus wills it so, the colors of the mask (and possibly the whole costume) can shift subtly yet precisely. A skillful seductress can enhance her charms (magickal or otherwise) simply by manipulating the color of the mask; rich tones may inspire lust, cold ones can intimidate, warm ones can make the spy seem trustworthy, and so on. Alchemical properties within the mask can respond to powerful Quintessence energies, too. Thus, our courtier might be able to

"smell" powerful magicks, enchanted poisons, and even a blazingly potent Daemon nearby.

[In system terms, the Grand Disguise adds six dice to Dice Pools that involve Disguise, Intimidation, Seduction and Subterfuge, so long as the Floreatus is within sight of the people she's trying to affect, and has time to "change her colors." The mask also grants her an effective Prime 1 sensory Effect that picks up strong concentrations of Quintessence (Daemon or Quintessence ratings of 5 or more.)

[Naturally, other factions use similar magickal disguises, some of which can utterly transform their shape and appearance in a matter of moments. Such strange costumes are obviously vain, of course, if the wearer makes a mistake and radically changes colors in front of mortal witnesses. Otherwise, the Grand Disguise remains cool and casual.

[And no, glass slippers don't usually come with the outfit.]



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Item, Fourth: Honeyed Words and Bitter Poison

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*



he bodies of three soldiers lay in their own blood before the double doors of the throne room. Maria paused by the men, placing a finger on each man's throat to see if the artery there still pulsed. Nothing. The third man's artery had been served outright, and the quantity of blood spilled down his heavy leather armor showed that any test would be futile, even for charitable certainty.

Then, Maria stood up, straightening her back and her skirt, and pushed against the right-hand door. It swung open easily.

Gareth sat on the steps to the throne, his sword resting across his knees, a look of weariness on his face. Another body — clad in the garment of a rich gentleman — lay face-down at his feet. Gareth's left shoulder had suffered a gash (from the edge of a sword or axe, Maria judged), and the blood there was already drying black. It looked to be a painful wound — hardly surprising, from a blow that had slashed through brigantine armor — but not, Maria estimated, disabling.

He looked up, unsuccessfully attempting a smile. "It is finished," he said.

"Finished?!?" Maria spat the word back. "The plague is laying waste a dozen villages, three of my own coven are sick unto death of some manner of hell-brewed poison...."

"It is finished" Gareth repeated. "The rot started at the head, and we have... dealt with that. What is left is a matter of healing and cleansing."

Maria sagged, relief and exhaustion suddenly flooding her soul. "If healing is possible," she muttered sourly.

"It is possible. I believe my old master can even suggest how your sister-witches might be cured."

"And would he aid us?"

"I doubt that you will give him much choice in the matter." Gareth rose, and, with one foot, turned the body at his feet onto its back. The chancellor's gray eyes stared upward, unseeing. There were no wounds visible on his body, and Maria thought that he might still be breathing.

"Your old master," she echoed.

Gareth grimaced. "He too needs healing. He danced a little too close to the Pit — in a good cause, I hope you will agree. I am sure that his present state is a matter of his own will, not of poison. With aid and kindness, he may return." Gareth smiled suddenly, a soldier's smile. "And you will grant him that kindness, I think, because he can indeed aid you. A fine jest, is it not?"

Maria chose to ignore the question. "And you, too, will aid us?" she asked.

"I? No. I think not. I am a soldier, and my service in this land is done. Best I leave before I grow bored of peace." He gestured absently with the sword in his right hand; then, as Maria's gaze was momentarily distracted, his left threw something at the nearest candle.

Black, impenetrable smoke exploded out to fill the room. A moment later, Maria heard the door behind her open, then heard Gareth's parting comment as it closed.

"Fare thee well, kindly witch — until the next war."

The smoke cleared, leaving Maria alone with the unconscious body. She stepped forward to examine it...

Elsewhere, in another court, another land, Lord Gaspar looked into his client's eyes and asked, "And so, Your Grace, what is it that require of me this trip? I assume my last recipe was to your satisfaction?"

"That is was, old friend," the Bishop replied. On the table between them lay a black silk purse, fattened by coins. "That it was... Do you have similar wares for me once again?"

Lord Gaspar nodded with the grace of a true-born courtier. "I have, Your Grace. I have..."

Weaving the Plot

Probable impossibilities are to be preferred to improbable possibilities.

— Aristotle, *The Poetics*

A court is not a dungeon. (Although it can lead you to one — the hard way.) It's not a tavern or a country road, and the rules are somewhat... different. You can't just haul out a broadsword when Duke Lorenzo ticks you off — unless he challenges you to a formal duel, in which case he probably has the advantage anyway. Thus, the setting differs a bit from conventional roleplaying scenarios. By trading the battlefields for the throne room, a Storyteller shifts the tone and content of her chronicle. And before one begins a dance, it's always a good idea to learn a few of the proper steps.

To begin with, courtly and swashbuckling stories need styles and themes. The style defines the "flavor" of the game, and hence the kind of characters — player and Storyteller-run alike — that fit in easily. The theme, meanwhile, shapes the storyline, giving the Storyteller some idea where things should be heading, and which plot elements to introduce next.

Note that the players can, and *should*, have plenty of influence over the game, but everyone must agree on certain basic guidelines. If the players and Storyteller have radically different ideas about the chronicle's style — if, for example, they want a tongue-in-cheek anachronism like the Disney version of *The Three Musketeers* while the Storyteller prefers Dumas' grim original — there will be a few problems. Likewise, if people have different ideas about

the theme — if the players run around blowing things up while the Storyteller struggles to re-enact *Hamlet* — the whole thing can quickly break down. These basic concerns should be settled during the design stages of the chronicle. Gamers who know each other fairly well may have unspoken agreements about how they like to play, but even a long-running group can discover an unexpected clash of expectations at an odd moment.

(When several players have different ideas about how a game should develop, the disharmony can be painful. If one character, say, comes across tragically while another clowns around, both players tend to become annoyed. The Storyteller should respond to such problems immediately.)

Incidentally, a chronicle consisting of several consecutive stories may involve rather different themes for each — this week, for instance, a tragedy, next week a comedy. Several interwoven plots with contrasting themes are possible, of course (see "High Plot/Low Plot" in the rulebook, p. 178), but be careful; too many abrupt contrasts might jar the mood in mid-scene. However, the chronicle's overall style should remain fairly consistent from story to story (after all, the same characters must fit into each tale), though some slow evolution is always possible.

The obvious style, the swashbuckling high adventure tale, focuses on flashing blades, witty heroes and astonishingly creative violence. Unlike the grim mood of "realistic" drama, the adventure maintains a lighter tone; people may be hurt, even killed, but things work out for the best in the end. (Contrast *Captain Blood* with, say, *A Man for All Seasons*.) Epitomized by Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (and its many sequels and adaptations), the adventure story blends elements of many of the styles below — a bit of comedy, a tragic sting, courtly pageantry, and flashes of romance. The result is the archetypal swashbuckling tale.

But lest we mistake this mode for the be-all-end-all of the genre, let's examine a few alternatives from another master story-teller, the Bard of Avon, and broaden the scope of our tales past the "witty swordplay" model. After all, richer inspiration makes for a richer game.

The Dramatic Style: Strong Plots, Strong Passions

All good stories involve some form of drama. In some cases, powerful conflicts provide the core of the tale. Ideally, a "dramatic" story is a bit larger than life. The characters are very talented (or humorously incompetent), and feel grand emotions. Events are earth-shattering, or at the very least *important*. Complications come thick and fast, and often occur at just the right moment to shift in plot in unexpected directions. Allies arrive in time to save the day — or enemies appear just as the heroes think they've won. Messages arrive in time to boost morale... or a moment too

late to stave off a tragedy. New inventions are created when they're needed most — by one side or the other. And so on, and so forth... drama never stands still.

All this runs the very real risk of slipping into cheap melodrama, which is, perhaps, the most common single error in roleplaying games. Your players deserve some excitement, but if the whole thing degenerates into camp, with the villain sailing away shouting, "*Soon I shall return! And more powerful than before!*" (from the climax of Disney's *Three Musketeers*), then the game becomes a joke. Even comedy games should be handled with *some* restraint; if players and characters are being hit over the head with jokes every minute or so, they'll never get a chance to draw breath and laugh.

Court settings are good for high-drama play because a lot of the richness is already there. The fate of nations may be involved, the protagonists are often powerful, determined, and well trained for their roles, the costumes and scenery are rich and colorful — all it takes is the right starting impulse, and the drama is underway....

Hamlet: The Drama of Courtly Revenge

A common subject for late Renaissance drama (so common that it's still often associated with this whole period) is revenge. The reason for this is hardly a mystery; upper-class morality is still saturated with chivalrous obsessions with honor; when that is attacked, the code demands that the victim seek *personal* restitution. Naturally, this pits the formerly-victimized-now-terrorizing character against greater forces: king, country, family, even life itself. Compassion, decency, self-preservation all go out the window. Vengeance becomes all that matters.

Whatever the circumstances, revenge provides a powerful, almost simplistic motivation for action. Everyone knows how much an insult burns, so when that insult is magnified by scope or severity — when a whole court sneers, or a loved one is slain — we can all relate to the character who will cross just about *any* line to redress the injury. The impulse behind revenge is never entirely rational, either, which makes it frightening. Once set in motion, a vengeful character may very well destroy everything he loves in the process.

Shakespeare plays numerous variations on this theme: Hamlet is compelled to exact a fully justified revenge, even though he has doubts about the whole idea. Othello is a noble but impetuous figure, manipulated into violence by a smooth-talking villain. The vengeful magus Prospero simply wants to avenge himself upon a few treacherous courtiers, while a dyed-in-the-wool fiend like Edmund seems driven to take revenge against the entire *world*. At heart, these different characters are all "chariots of wrath/by demons driven" — demons that were inflicted upon them by others,

but that cannot rest. The resulting tales — *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *King Lear* — become legends... legends founded upon hearts turned to stone.

In a game context, it's ridiculously easy to piss a character off. The trick lies in making an insult or injury so memorable that the character wants to move Heaven and Hell to redress the wrong. The "character" in question doesn't have to belong to a player, of course, nor does he have to be powerful. Indeed, a vengeful stablehand or widower can set in motion a plan that would shame a magus. In the fragile world of politics, a single competent courtier with a grudge can throw an entire nation into chaos. The passions behind revenge can be useful tools for devious manipulators, too; the avenger may be acting on false evidence, carefully concocted to bring about the destruction of an innocent victim. The harm he causes will not be any less devastating. (Again, see *Othello*.)

Revenge can motivate a multitude of plots. A player's character may be seeking satisfaction for its own sake (like Inigo Montoya); he might try to counteract some other character's plans (like d'Artagnan), or to soften his revenge (like Miranda); he might even be totally innocent, simply burned in the same conflagration (like Ophelia). Chances are, he'll soon have motivations for revenge himself... thus beginning another tale.

Romeo and Juliet: The Romance of Personal Tragedy

Renaissance-era storytelling is never afraid of the power of tragedy; the survivors may learn lessons from the plot, but happy endings are rare. Motives such as love, revenge, jealousy or ambition can lead even noble heroes to disaster. When the hammer falls, the ending probably won't be pretty — but it *will* be exciting.

Romantic tragedy, by definition, ends badly. All the same, the tale must leave *something* good behind. An ending in which everyone dies and no one is redeemed is no fun at all. Even if the lovers die (as they often do), those left behind should gain something from their sacrifice. If nothing else, the characters in love should burn so brightly that they shame the stars themselves. The lovers' passions lead to ruin, but leave everyone around them (hopefully, both players *and* characters) wishing that, for just a moment, *they* could feel something so intense, something so worth dying for.

Naturally, a romantic tragedy needs romance — needs passion so voracious that, as with revenge, the characters will do *anything* to be together. And of course, there's some huge obstacle — duty, family, marriage, a curse — that should keep the lovers apart, but can't. In a game context, this sort of thing can be tricky; if a player is involved in this fatal dance, make sure that she (or he) is a willing partner to what may prove to be the character's last fling. As the

Storyteller, you can *inspire* a player to love another character, but you cannot *compel* her to do so. If the lovers are both players' characters, make sure the two players agree to the romance; if one of them is a Storyteller character, make him (or her) so attractive that the player wants to follow him to Hell... and beyond. (Note that "attraction" entails more than a high Appearance Trait and a few good die rolls. The character should be charming, usually in a dangerous way, if the romance is to work at all.)

In a chronicle, tragedy can strike either the players' characters, or the characters around them. In the latter case, players' characters (especially swashbuckling adventurer types) are likely to find themselves spectators in someone else's affairs. Perhaps, like Juliet's nurse, a player's magus might be able to soften the road to true love; then again, like Friar Lawrence, she might just make things worse. She could be one lover's friend (like Mercutio), or his enemy (like Tybalt). Perhaps members of the player group wind up on opposing sides of the affair. Either way, the player(s) should not be able to prevent the doomed affair. In fact, if the victim of the tragedy has been led into evil by her flaws, the player's character might actually be the agent of her failure and punishment.

A first-hand romance story can be hard to storytell well; a second-hand affair can provide an interesting plot-hook, but there's some risk of making the players feel ineffectual. Either way, the Storyteller should be careful with a tragic romance plot. Most players dislike it when their characters are being "picked on"; others might not appreciate the consequences of defeat, and very few like being "led around by the nose" just to suit the plot. Building a tragedy that's deliberately designed to *kill* a player's character is dangerous — the player *must* be prepared to accept the end of that character and that phase of the campaign. There are, however, other kinds of ruin: a good-hearted prince or honorable lady can be socially disgraced and emotionally devastated by a romance gone wrong. (See the example of Lancelot and Guinevere, or the climax of *Dangerous Liaisons*.) A magus might be forbidden to love, but fall in love just the same (like the Lady of Shallot). When you figure magick into the equation, a doomed love affair can lead to loss of power (like "Beauty and the Beast"); a curse (like "Tam Lin"); or even the doorway to a new and exciting adventure (like the legend of Thomas the Rhymer). Whatever path you choose, play fair, and give the player(s) a chance to learn from the fall — and even, in a way, to enjoy it. No fire burns hotter than the flames in the heart of love.

(Note: **The Wraith: The Oblivion** supplement **Love Beyond Death** features several chapters about romantic roleplaying, including plot hooks, circumstances, cautions and Storyteller hints. **The Sorcerers Crusade Companion** and **Infernalism: The Path of Screams** contain several spirits that thrive on broken hearts, and **The Fragile Path**

presents a tragic love story that literally fractures the Council of Nine. Any or all of these can be worthy resources for a tragic romance scenario.)

King Lear: The Horror of Grand Tragedy

If personal tragedies can at least teach survivors and onlookers some kind of lesson, tragedy on the grand scale — striking at the highest levels of a court, say — often leaves utter destruction behind. The forces of justice and virtue may win in the end, but it's a war of attrition with the forces of chaos, and the casualties are always heavy.

A courtly tragedy — or any other tragedy, for that matter — begins with a deadly flaw. Some character possesses a weakness that leads to ruin. In the case of a grand tragedy, the character is great and powerful, and the ruin encompasses dozens, or even hundreds, of lives. In *Lear*, a vain king exiles his most loyal daughter and followers, then hands his kingdom off to flatterers; by the time he realizes his error, the court is in chaos and the kingdom is devastated. It's not hard to see where a similar situation might lead a party of courtiers, especially if they're Awakened, and perceptive enough to realize what's happening. Naturally, fixing the problem won't be easy — kings and the like tend to be very touchy about their flaws, and aren't fond of those who point such errors out to them....

A grand tragedy set at court should present a dominant, central theme for the chronicle; spread over several sessions, the tale will influence nearly every event in some way. It's unlikely that the central figure, the focus of the tragedy, will be a player's character unless you're exceptionally lucky and one of your players is up to the task. That central figure will usually be one of the greatest powers in the realm (a proud king, a formidable usurper, an influential court magus, etc.) whose errors bring chaos — civil war, overwhelming tyranny, demonic incursions or the like. There may, of course, be more than one major figure involved: unwise kings pick bad advisors; usurpers have sidekicks, and tend to prosper under weak rulers. Add magick to the mix, and the treacheries can grow darker still — evil magicians, no matter what their station might be, can use their Arts to corrupt anyone nearby. (Again, see the villainous courtiers described in **Infernalism**, and the "Techniques of Temptation" sidebar in the same book, pp. 43-44.) By their nature, men and women of power attract unsavory types, and pursue unfortunate compromises and obsessions. When things go wrong, the forces of virtue and reason often start weak, and suffer many defeats along the way. The story is about their struggle to hold the line.

Of course, from the point of view of those involved, "grand tragedies" are really stories of valor and nobility. The heroes of the tale are trying to *avert* a crisis, not wallow in it. If you're trying to maintain a somber mood, this might

Deus ex Machina

When you're playing games of intrigue and betrayal, things can go to hell in a hurry. This is doubly true if you're running a roleplaying game, where your characters can wind up at cross-purposes faster than you can say *et tu, Brute?* The witch charms a loyal advisor, the Guildsman joins a coup, the Gabrielite vows an oath of loyalty, and the street urchin swipes the Queen's best necklace. Suddenly the whole group has daggers at one another's throats and the royal guardsmen are running down the hallway, weapons drawn.

Now what?

There's only a certain amount a Storyteller can do to undo acts of complete player stupidity. But when a chance remark or a turn of events puts your chronicle in mortal danger, there *are* a few tricks you can try:

- **The Plague!** In an era where whole cities are devastated in a week or so, nothing says "Drop what you're doing and run!" quite like the ringing of plague bells. Generally, when someone falls to a sudden, inexplicable malady, or appears in the town square covered in sores or gasping for breath, cries of "The plague!" begin to rise. Soon, the church towers resound with alarms. Anyone with half a brain will be scrambling for the nearest gate, and your troupe (who've hopefully caught the hint) make use of the chaos and put their current problems aside... for now.

- **A Common Enemy:** Along similar lines, a common opponent can arrive at just the right time to forestall hostilities. Perhaps the demon in the basement has gotten free; or the neighboring princes have decided to invade; or the treacherous servant stumbles into the wrong place at the wrong time. Suddenly, the need to kick the enemy's ass outweighs the temptation to kick one another's.

- **A Common Friend:** "What are you fools doing!?" At just the right moment, a powerful ally — the Prince, a mentor, an allied cabal, etc. — interrupts the fray and saves the characters from what they *almost* did. Chances are, this ally will have enough influence, firepower or magical might to stop the crisis before things get beyond repair. The characters will, of course, find themselves deeply in debt to their common friend. God knows how badly things might have gone if he hadn't appeared....

- **A Sudden Scream:** Just as the blades are ready to fall, a frenzied cry erupts from somewhere nearby. What's happening? That's for you to improvise, Storyteller. Whatever it is, the reason had better be good. This tactic only works for a moment, although it may very well lead to one of the other options.

- **Ka-Boom!:** What in Hell was *that!*? Suddenly, masonry is raining down and everyone's ears are ringing. Is the castle under attack? Did the alchemist drop the wrong flask? Is the dragon over the hills annoyed at someone nearby? Again, this option opens the door for some other possibility; unlike the scream, however, it has the added advantage of knocking everyone off their feet and possibly blowing a hole in the walls big enough to allow for escape.

- **The Devil's Due:** Is there anyone with power who doesn't rack up some pretty vile karma? Probably not. At just the right moment, the bill comes due from some poor soul nearby. Perhaps the witch had a Scourge backlash coming, or the King's Infernal master has come to collect his toll. Whatever the case, this "distraction" is bad enough to get the characters back together while wiping out most of the obstacles between the magi and the nearest exit.

Are these tactics cheesy? Well, yes, actually. But they're also time-honored ways of getting characters out of a jam without having to clean them off the walls in the process. What they do with the break is up to them.

With a bit of imagination, a *deus ex machina* can seem perfectly reasonable (if a bit fortuitous). Don't make this a habit, though. If your players are stupid enough to continually dig themselves into pits, they don't deserve many chances to escape unscathed.

(Note: For those who don't understand the terms, *deus ex machina* is Latin for "god in the machine," and refers to a theatrical or literary device [figurative or literal] in which some divine providence saves the day by providing an amazing coincidence.)

present a problem, especially if your players are thinking like typical roleplaying "adventurers"; insert a witty swordsman or an ironic courtier into an otherwise depressing tale, and the overwhelming sense of tragedy will soon be wrecked. (Which might not always be a bad thing, mind you — roleplaying is still a *game*, after all, and games are meant to be fun. If the characters simply sit around moaning about the dreadful state of affairs, the story could rapidly deteriorate into some godawful Anne Rice novel... or worse, Russian literature.) The trick here is twofold: as the Storyteller, keep the atmosphere and events gloomy but not oppressive; and let your players know when it's time to stop the clever quips and be serious. If they simply can't do so, don't try running a full-on tragedy — things will just get frustrating. Perhaps you might try a "dry run" with a small-

scale tragedy (like a doomed romance) to see whether or not your players can (or want to) explore the darker side of power.

A grand tragedy can present some grand opportunities for dramatic roleplaying. Even so, don't try to bludgeon your players with the idea; rather, let them experience a few small stings of defeat and loss when they expect an easy ride, then see how they react. It's always possible that a few failures will teach them they can't fence their way out of every problem. If they enjoy the new challenge, great. Introduce them to your own version of *Lear* or *Macbeth* and let the blood and tears flow. If not, acknowledge that and move on. If your people came to play heroes, that may be all they want out of the game.

Coriolanus: The Drama of Politics

Tragedies of revenge and thwarted love are, in essence, personal. High society may provide them with an interesting venue, but such stories could happen anywhere. And while tragedy is a powerful mode, it has its limits; if every single story ended that way, the world would soon sink into complete chaos. Sometimes, a little variety is essential.

Stories about courts — centers of power and government — often involve politics as well as passion. After all, in an age of princes, tyrants and worldly popes, personalities and politics are intimately mingled. In such tales, the court itself becomes both a stage for the action and a character in its own right. Through the court and the influence it represents, personal struggles become the fate of nations. Rivalries, romances and crusades are inflated into affairs of state, and hundreds of lives may hinge on a single bow or insult. Whereas a tale of personal drama revolves around a small but determined group of people, a political one raises the stakes by tying the actions of characters to widespread consequences. In a story like *Coriolanus*, human passions and governmental concerns intertwine until it's difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. A court, after all, transforms the men and women within it into symbols of state. In essence, such people *become* the state. What they do, it does. What it needs, they demand.

However decadent they might seem, all courtiers are raised with a sense of office— Lord Bollingbroke is, for all purposes, the province of Bollingbroke, and while he might abuse the office, he still feels some responsibility to his land and his people. (This point is well worth noting for players' characters with the Merit: *Title*.) When Bollingbroke the province needs action, Bollingbroke the man must act. This sense of duty marks the difference between a grand tragedy like *Lear* and a political drama like *Coriolanus*; in one, human passions overcome the kingdom's needs, while in the other duty to the kingdom overrides personal desires. In a political story, the characters are driven by greater circumstances: a town is invaded, and its prince must respond. Those circumstances set the plot in motion, and the various courtiers work to retain, expand, protect or reinforce their interests. In the example above, the prince must do whatever he can to defend his town from the invaders, or he is no prince at all! Naturally, he's got rivals, and they have their own plans for the town. When these interests clash, harsh words and blades often do likewise. And in politics, as in love, any tactic is fair game.

A political story features high stakes, favors, double-dealing and intrigue. No single person can represent a state, of course — he'll need allies, enforcers, advisors and debtors beside him all the way. In a game setting, the players can take the roles of bodyguards, spies, councilors, conspirators, loyalists, rebels, assassins, or even the leaders themselves. Their activities serve a greater purpose, and have powerful

repercussions indeed. In such stories, the dance of court blossoms in full flower; literal courtesy is more effective than a naked sword, and rivalries are cloaked behind kind words — “for the good of the state,” of course! A political scenario forces players to *think*; the cost of rash actions can be measured in hundreds of lives.

... Which, of course, is one of those elements that make political stories so damned interesting: politics *matter*! Innocent people live or die because of the things courtly characters do. As Queen Eleanor says in *The Lion in Winter*: “We are the origins of war... dead bodies rot in field and stream because the living ones are rotten.” The long-range consequences of political intrigue can lend idealistic flavor to swordplay, or add a level of urgency to otherwise-mundane gamesmanship. (See the film *Ridicule* for some great examples.) Political scenarios can make players think about what their characters believe in, too. Don't be afraid to contrast idealism with the cynicism of courtiers who've become so obsessed with power that they've lost track of any kind of morality — or to ask which side of that line the players' characters are currently standing on.

Add magick and the machinations of the various Daedalean and mystickal factions, and a political tale assumes new dimensions. Imagine the subtle games around Rome, where literally hundreds of magi from dozens of secret societies vie for influence over the Pope and Church. Then add scheming vampires, Mind magick, and True Faith to the mix. Hmmm... Chances are, you'll want to work with something simpler, like a rural duke's court, or a merchant prince's empire. Even here, a few charm-spells and a mysterious rival or two can turn a straightforward task into a nightmare — especially if the local Inquisitors discover sorcerers in their midst...

Complex political plots are notoriously hard to run well; by definition, they involve subtlety, deviousness, and social and psychological manipulation. Some players may be able to handle such elements, but others may wind up totally lost. Fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities for physical action, too. War, after all, is “the continuation of politics by other means,” and not all of its skirmishes occur out in the open; look at the “affair of the Queen's necklace” in *The Three Musketeers* — lives are lost, but the “war” is hardly public news. Even so, don't fall into an endless rut of assassinations and sword fights. A courtly setting offers richer possibilities, even for an uncouth Pagan. There's drama of all kinds to be found in courtly debates and diplomatic missions; there's even room for romance in the Renaissance system of political marriages and forbidden desires. (Imagine you're a princess's bodyguard; now imagine you're in love with her. She's in love with you, too — but she has to marry the Duke of Salisbury in a fortnight! What to do...?)

A well-rounded political story should contain a handful of parties striving for power (usually at one another's

throats); some backstabbing (literal and otherwise); a bit of fancy socializing (at feasts, masques, and so forth); a few brawls, betrayals and close escapes (to keep the blood flowing); and a terrible price for failure. Your players should always be aware that their actions determine the fate of the realm, but their characters ought to be given a few chandeliers to swing from just to keep things interesting. Whatever you do, don't let political elements overshadow the human ones. A crown may represent the kingdom, but it rests upon a human brow.

Much Ado About Nothing: Comical Drama

Comedy can be pretty hard to handle in games ("dying is easy...") — though not, in fact, as hard as people sometimes suggest. The trick lies in not trying too hard. Wringing a couple of cheap laughs from a chamber pot and a tankard of ale is no great task; the comedic drama, though, is a different beast. Sure, you can stage the Renaissance equivalent of *Dumb and Dumber*, but that wouldn't really be true to the setting. **The Sorcerers Crusade** focuses on competent, generally dignified people, and courtly, swashbuckling games in the period should always pay a certain degree of attention to dignity and honor. (If only in their absence.) In other words, excessive slapstick isn't really appropriate. Wit, irony, sarcasm, and the uproar caused by misunderstandings and bad timing are more fitting to the setting, and to the period.

Renaissance comedy has a long tradition of sharp satire and mistaken impressions — which is pretty appropriate when you consider that this is an age of transition, of changing rules and grand excesses. This "high comedy" plays off elements like disguise, pomposity, clever wordplay and overreaction: a courtier has a screaming fit over a minor social slight; a disguised woman flirts with her would-be lover while lecturing him — in rather explicit double-entendres — about the ways of wooing. Meanwhile, a vain duke signs his worldly goods off to a flattering con man. In such stories, the potential consequences are severe, but no one truly suffers... unless, of course, he deserves to.

Slapstick isn't *totally* out of place in a swashbuckling adventure, either. There's an equally long tradition of "low comedy" of the

chamber pot variety, which frequently alternates with "high comedy" in a comedic drama scenario. Again, the people on the receiving end of the laughs usually deserve their fates: Eager but incompetent characters attempt stunts they don't have the skill to pull off, while more-talented ones humiliate their enemies with wild feats involving slashed trousers and dye vats. Proud artisans or magi overreach themselves with strange machinery or elaborate rites, and suffer spectacular failures as "punishment." Actually, the occasional comic screw-up is a pretty standard element of swashbuckling stories, so long as the humor has a subversive edge. The laughs come not from some servant dumping manure out a window, but from the reaction of the stuffy noble *below* the window, who was expecting a gift from his beloved.

One approach to comedy which was popular during the period itself, but which *might* not play so well to modern player groups, is "the servant joke," also known as "the rude mechanicals." This brand of low humor relies on the upper class perception that social inferiors — the unwashed, uneducated, uncouth commoners — are intrinsically funny, no matter what they do. Hence, idiotic commoners run to and fro, making asses of themselves simply by existing. This sort of thing doesn't go over *quite* as well in politically correct modern-day gaming troupes, but it's more prevalent than one might think; anyone who thinks we're too "enlightened" to laugh at comical servants is invited to watch 10 minutes of any episode of *Black Adder*. Naturally, this knife cuts both ways — the upper classes, with their pretensions, warped priorities, and complete ignorance of practical matters, are *also* pretty funny. Renaissance writers were fully aware of this. If they could get a few good laughs at *everyone's* expense, so much the better.

Magickal spells and backstabbing wizards can make things even more fun. Indeed, enchantments and strange disguises are stock elements of Renaissance comedy, and can be played for laughs even when the magi had something more serious in mind. Imagine, for example, the spy whose magickal disguise leads her into an unexpected love affair; or the haughty magus whose Scourge backlash turns him into a giddy leach. Courtly comedy provides a wonderful opportunity for the



Storyteller to inflict a Scourging the troupe will never forget; a visit from Implico the Vanity-bane can make even the mightiest wizard look pretty foolish.

Courtly comedy can also provide a rich source of ironic commentary on the entire scene. Never mind the servants or the upper classes; the whole business of court, with its rituals, arrogance, trivial jealousies and insincere friendships, is inherently ridiculous. Comedy is a valid response to such absurdity; it may be lightweight or dark, and it should always have an edge, but it's easy to find. Just be careful whose face you're laughing in — some powerful people really don't get the joke — and watch out for the moment when things turn serious. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, the heroine demands that her new lover take revenge for her slandered friend. A comedic drama should always end well, of course, but things can look pretty bleak for a while.

(Note: The Kenneth Branagh/Emma Thompson version of *Much Ado*, while out of period for this setting, contains wonderful examples of both high and low comic drama.)

The Historical Style: Big Names and Famous Places

The Dark Fantastic world is essentially the world of the historical Renaissance, with a few dramatic liberties and a lot of secret history and magick thrown in. Thus, *The Sorcerers Crusade* offers plenty of opportunities for Storytellers who want to build their plots around the real people and events that laid the foundations of the modern world.

The problem with using historical figures, events, and settings in your game is that history can be as much a cage as a framework. Unless you're ready completely alter history and work out the consequences in detail, it's simply not possible to let your troupe help Richard III win the Battle of Bosworth, or stop Rodrigo Borgia from becoming Pope. But if they can't change events, your players will probably feel that their characters are powerless, mere observers in a procession of famous names and places.

The solution to this problem lies in preplanning, the idea of *secret* history, and a little manipulation of a player's character's objectives. The trick is to weave plots around the (often obscure) events of recorded history, while ensuring that the players' characters seek goals that keep history "on track." For example, it may well be impossible to save Richard III, but it *might* well be possible to save the Princes in the Tower from whatever happened to them (in itself, a mystery to solve). Then — well, the princes can't very well take the throne of England — the tide is running too strongly in favor of the Tudors — but they can find a quiet, safe place to live out their lives, or take some other role in secret history — perhaps, say, in a Horizon Realm. After all,

royal heritage has symbolic power in some schools of magick, so they could be Awakened to become powerful magi in the future.

There's also always the amusement value of introducing historical figures before they became famous, perhaps with some foreshadowing of their later destiny (a trick that's popular with certain historical novelists). A common joke involves keeping the future celebrity's name secret until the end of the scene: Who *was* that wild-eyed sea-captain who was trying to eavesdrop on the Void Seekers? The barman shrugs and says his name is Christoph something — Colon, he thinks.

Considering the meddlesome antics of the Ascension War factions, it's entirely possible that your troupe will wind up involved in some affair that will be critical to future history. Perhaps a group of Daedaleans have been assigned to protect Leonardo da Vinci from an assassination attempt; or a Verbena coven has discovered a secret plot against King Henry VIII — a plot led by a mysterious figure known as Dracul. In essence, the players' characters must move through the shadows and cracks of history, sometimes applying a gentle push, other times keeping the walls from crumbling. Time-based magick and prophecies make ideal set-ups for this sort of thing, and can lead characters to all kinds of harsh decisions. ("I cannot tell you why, but we must allow them to burn the French maiden. It is hard to understand, but trust me....")

Henry V: Politics and War

Of course, courtly history often revolves around "big events" of a very traditional kind: power politics, warfare and diplomacy. Such arenas always have room for adventurer-hero types; every campaign and battle has something for an oddly "talented" spy or swordsman to do. On the other hand, wars and grand alliances have a scale and momentum that makes it hard for individuals to really change the shape of history — which, for game purposes, may be a good thing.

Any leader worth his title has uses for Awakened characters, even if he doesn't know (or doesn't *want* to know) about the source of their strange powers. Leader-types are often *very* good at reading people, and even a skillful magus might have a hard time hiding her "talents" from a perceptive ruler. Kings and princes love secret weapons and unique advantages; new devices, scrying and precognitive spells, bewildering enchantments, prophecy... oh, yes, a good leader can always employ such things! Hence, it's ridiculously easy to work magi into an historical scenario. Naturally, there's no telling *whose* side of history the characters are working on; a cabal assisting Richard III is not exactly backing "the good guys" — but then again, who's to say what *Richard's* side of the story is?

Which leads us to another fun possibility: magi and night-folk working on both sides of a conflict. Of course, such wizards will have to be subtle about their roles — even the most useful advisors become liabilities if they're obviously sorcerers, so flinging hellfire across the battlefield is generally a bad idea. And so the shadow-world of politics deepens with the even more secretive affairs of wizards and suchlike. Those secret wars, in turn, can provide the Storyteller with a way of keeping historical changes to a minimum; after all, if both sides have magickal agents, they might cancel one another out in the grand scheme of things, leaving history more or less intact.

Like a grand tragedy scenario, the war story has very high stakes. The outcome of a single battle can change the world forever. (No Hastings = no England.) But, as Henry V points out, wars are fought on several fronts; the King must first master himself, then his men, then the field, then diplomacy, all the while staying one step ahead of conspirators. A group of magi can be far more than fireball machines, even during a war. They might be spies, assassins, diplomats, or even royal confidantes who steel the King to do what must be done. (See the movie *Elizabeth*.) When the swords start swinging, players' characters should have a definite advantage — it's no fun to get cut down by some lucky yeoman. In game terms, a large-scale combat situation provides an ideal opportunity for general action rolls (see the rulebook, p. 188). Even so, your players should fear an open battlefield. There are a great many ways to suffer defeat, and no magus wants to end up like Joan of Arc....

Henry VIII: The Pageantry of the Past

Sometimes players don't mind just being tourists in the past. Sometimes, in fact, it's what they want. We all love to be amazed, and a rousing tale told against an exotic backdrop can be pretty damned amazing. Courtly and mercantile settings are generally best for this sort of tale because, well, frankly, they're a whole lot prettier than disintegrating peasant hovels. And this is the *Renaissance*; you've got set design by Michelangelo, props by Leonardo da Vinci, and production by Lorenzo the Magnificent.

Pageantry-laden stories needn't be entirely lacking in adventure, either. These are violent, chaotic times, with assassins in every court, pickpockets in the streets outside, fanatical idealists locked in debate with amoral schemers, and the occasional full-scale war for variety. Oh, and great parties. *Great* parties. (See Appendix II.) If your players like to spend half the session working out what they're going to wear for the next big event, don't stop them. Let 'em have their fun! (Though if half of them are debating tunic lengths and the other half are, well, looking a little bored, it may be time for a change of pace.) Extravagance lends itself to new *kinds* of stories, too, ones that can be played for

pathos, laughs, or both. Imagine the conniptions a vain Guildsman might have if his favorite tailor is kidnapped by the agents of a mad fashion victim....

One thing to bear in mind about this sort of story, however: it requires a lot of research. You'll need to know who is where, and when, what they want and what they think; you'll need a good grasp of the politics, and probably the military positions, too; and, yes, it'll probably help to have an idea whether tunics are being worn long or short this year. If you're already an addict of historical trivia, this is a wonderful opportunity to go to town. If not, well, perhaps you can make it up if you're inventive enough to work with the gaps in your troupe's historical education.

(*Note: The Sorcerers Crusade Companion* features a wealth of background trivia in Chapters I, II and V; *Crusade Lore* is stocked with similar material in Chapters I and II.)

Richard III: The Shadows of History

Despite its wondrous elements, however, *The Sorcerers Crusade* focuses on the *Dark Renaissance*. Things are often somewhat nastier than they appear in the history books — the torture chambers are always full, and alarmingly easy to fall into. Well-known historical figures may be allied with vampires (or *be* vampires), or possess an interest in black magic — not that human beings ever need supernatural excuses to indulge in horrific behavior. Dark historical stories resemble other forms of historical drama, but emphasize the sinister side of things. As you troupe might soon discover, that darkness can be very deep indeed.

Mood is all-important in a shadow-history tale. Trust is foolishness, and treachery is the order of the day. Everything seems bigger, darker, more insane. Players' characters are less likely to rescue the Princess in the Tower than to discover their horribly mutilated corpses being eaten by crows — killed, perhaps, as part of some perverse ritual, or worse yet, maybe just for fun. Such tales are gothic in the truest sense, dismal tragedies in which laughter is just a respite from tears. This sort of thing can be badly overdone, of course, leading to a "Hammer films" sort of chronicle. But in small doses, bits of cold terror and staggering dread can create very effective tales.

In games like these, there are plenty of opportunities for Awakened spies (whose loyalties may be split between short-sighted, amoral masters and the deeper understanding magick brings); greedy courtiers who essentially play Chess with human pieces; half-hidden primal horrors; Infernal cults; and secrets — *lots* of secrets. In such tales, swords are instruments of quick murders, not acrobatic duels. Comedy is rare, though bleak irony may be commonplace. As the Storyteller, you might even play out dark reversals, where luminaries like Michelangelo are corrupt and "villains" like Richard III are victims of circumstances.

Heroism, in such settings, means holding up a candle in the night. A dark historical game could make an ideal background for a Daedalean chronicle — and give the old “soulless Technocracy” stereotype a good, hard smack. Hey, if you had to contend with so dark a world, you'd become pretty ruthless, too!

The Magical Style: Spirits, Spells and Secrets

Despite all this swashbuckling and courtly plotting, **The Sorcerers Crusade** is still very much a game about magick. Admittedly, such powers generally have to be kept in the background at court, but sometimes, mystical forces and advanced science can come to the fore.

How does magick play out in court? That depends on the court. As a Storyteller, you've got two choices: either the court in question is a magickal place — a Covenant, Cray, lodge, faerie castle, etc.; or it's a mortal court wherein the Awakened play subtle but important roles. In the former, wizards and Daedaleans can really cut loose, fighting wizardly duels across ballrooms and great halls, assailing enemy fortresses with lightning and rifled cannon, and generally using their powers. The latter settings add an extra layer of subterfuge and misdirection to your stories, granting the Awakened an air of mystery and strangeness, and pitting them against witch-hunters and suspicious courtiers who would turn those powers against the magi.

How well do the magi within the court get along? Again, this depends. In a small province, the court might boast a single resident magus, witch or alchemist (if that much), plus her assistants and disciplines. Chances are, these sorcerers get along, although there might be a few rivalries going on behind the scenes. A larger court, however, could be the site of some intense politicking. The Dodge's seat in Venice probably has Traditionalists, Daedaleans, independent sorcerers, and a handful of night-folk contending for influence, not to mention the mortal courtiers. Competition within this court is probably a complex, often fatal, affair. The same is true of magickal courts; a unified stronghold, like a Guild Hall or Hermetic Covenant, will present a fairly cooperative front undercut by various rivalries. A huge common-ground of various groups, like Horizon or the White Tower, will be a hotbed of intrigue. Certamen, one-upmanship, even assassination are common events, and an enemy of the court has plenty of weak links to pull upon.

No matter what kind of court you present, the stronger parties will try to keep bloodshed to a minimum (except, of course, when it suits their purposes). The Queen doesn't want her Artificer gunsmith killing her Gabrielite marshal... not just yet, anyway. As a rule of thumb, assume that the more hostile factions there are, the more the game will be about magick. If things are relatively sedate on the magickal front, occult elements will become more mysterious, enchanting, and possibly more dangerous to the health of the realm.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Magickal Comedy

Even the intricate world of the Awakened has moments of humor and romance. In fact, it's often easier to run light-hearted games in the Dark Fantastic era if there's plenty of magick around — it can mitigate the brutal, sordid, disease-ridden realities of the historic 15th and 16th centuries! In a highly magickal game, Tradition magi can control diseases, and often accept women as (more or less) equals; Daedalean strongholds may have running water, decent heating, and even democracy of a sort. Many Awakened folk know how to make life enjoyable, given the chance. And in a magickal comedy, they have that chance, and run with it.

Magickal comedy tends to be melodramatic and romantic, with whimsical powers and non-human beings. In or around the province of the court, some mysterious force begins to turn events on their collective ear. Lovers become rivals, stodgy folk grow giddy, and odd transformations of mind and body upset the established order. For a short while, chaos reigns; the mortals prove what fools they can be, and the immortals don't fare much better. Eventually, the old order is restored, and everyone simply marks the strange events off as a dream... an eerily vivid dream.

A comical interlude presents an excellent venue for a **Changeling/Mage** crossover game, or at least for a short appearance of fae powers. (See **Crusade Lore**, pp. 63-68 for details.) Of course, the Fair Folk often alternate between whimsy and threat, and the Unseelie ones can get downright nasty. Stories featuring faeries can be really amusing, but the Fair Ones' pranks could turn dangerous at any moment. Still, sorcerers are advised not to take things *too* seriously — their reactions will set the tone for the faeries' antics. Generally, Verbena and other Pagans deal fairly well with such beings; haughty court wizards probably lack the necessary whimsy, while rigid types will be *begging* for trouble. The startling creativity of Daedalean craftsmen would fascinate most Fair Folk — only nocker fae can master such complicated dreams! In either case, the story should coast along the edge of terror before the laughs begin. (Look at how viciously *Midsummer Night's* lovers behave until Oberon sets things right again.)

These whimsical stories also provide great opportunities for Scourgings. When you think about it, Resonance and the Scourge have quite a bit of comic potential, really. The Scourge could be considered as Creation's impulse to play a vast (and dangerous) practical joke on anyone who gets too pompous, and many of its spirits — like Implico, Ber Willider, Whisper, and even Blodeuedd the Tempress — can be played for laughs. As with other humorous tales, the Storyteller is challenged to keep a light hand on the proceedings without going overboard. A goofy dream can be fun, but if the giggles remain after the dream has faded, the joke will grow old quickly.

Macbeth: Malign Interventions

At the other extreme, supernatural forces can be dangerous and sinister, especially at court. In this sort of tale, some mysterious entity appears and subverts the ruling powers with powers of its own. Palaces dominated by Infernalists or vampires make obvious settings for horrific tales of power exploited and abused, but sinister forces can appear almost anywhere, and can quickly turn mere mortal lords to dangerous opponents.

Nor does the malign power in question have to be “evil” *per se*. When a demented Maraud infects a court, the results are often disastrous; kingship can become a maelstrom in the hands of an insane king. An alchemist can have courtiers on their knees if he can turn lead into gold (or at least convince them that he can), while a seductive witch wraps people around her finger in more carnal ways; both sorcerers exploit the court for their own gain. The Traditions and the Order of Reason each strive for political influence, too, and while their stated intentions might be good (if diametrically opposed), the outcome can be catastrophic. It’s all well and good to bring back the Pagan Old Ways... until the Baron starts making blood-sacrifices to Odin and the neighboring lords decide a crusade is in order. And what if that princely ally of Daedalean progress decides to speed up the process by leading a rebellion against his father? Good intentions often lead... well, you know... especially when politics and magick are involved.

Sometimes, the occult entity simply sets the chaos in motion. In *Macbeth*, three witches inspire regicide and war with a simple, cryptic prophecy. Human weakness does the rest. A court can provide the backdrop for an all-out wizard war, of course, but this sort of story often works best if the magick remains subtle. After all, evil influence blossoms when it’s hidden from the light. In many cases, the malignant party sidesteps the obvious leader and subverts his associates instead. Thus, an Infernalist might corrupt a seneschal, not the Prince. Rooting out this kind of evil can be difficult indeed; unless the heroes of the hour recognize the source of corruption, they may very well conspire against the wrong target — which may, in fact, serve the plans of their enemy.

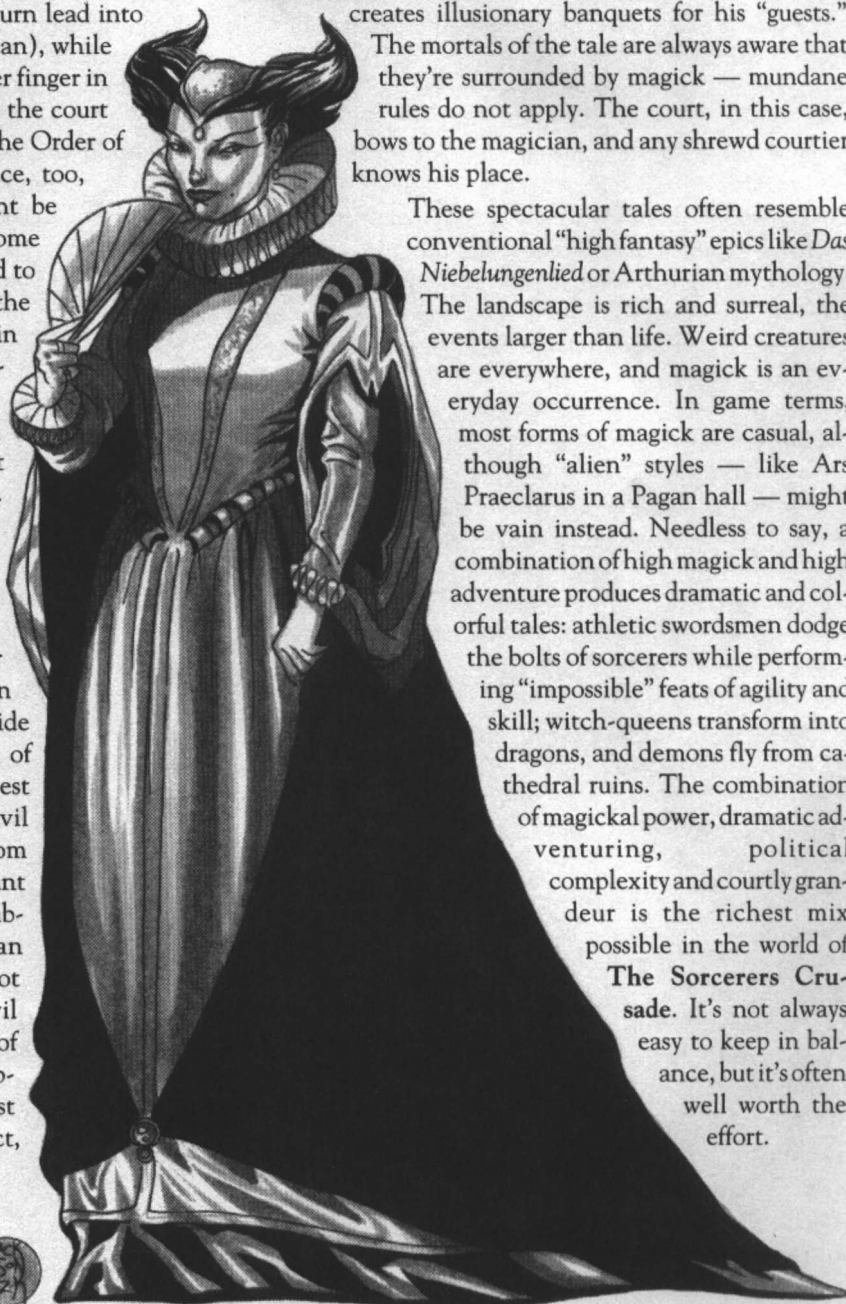
The Tempest: High Magick

Finally, there’s the option of making high magick the centerpiece of an epic story. This probably works best in an “openly magickal” court setting, or at least in a fictional location removed from “real” historical events; there’s little point in attempting this sort of thing if you have put practical constraints on it.

High magick plots focus on the literal “affairs of wizards”: the schemes and conflicts of arch-mages, Otherworldly spirits, faeries, and so forth; wars and treaties between Covenants; mystical conquests and invasions; and any other sort of plot in which magick plays an obvious role. In *The Tempest*, Prospero commands spirits, raises storms, and creates illusionary banquets for his “guests.”

The mortals of the tale are always aware that they’re surrounded by magick — mundane rules do not apply. The court, in this case, bows to the magician, and any shrewd courtier knows his place.

These spectacular tales often resemble conventional “high fantasy” epics like *Das Niebelungenlied* or Arthurian mythology. The landscape is rich and surreal, the events larger than life. Weird creatures are everywhere, and magick is an everyday occurrence. In game terms, most forms of magick are casual, although “alien” styles — like *Ars Praeclarus* in a Pagan hall — might be vain instead. Needless to say, a combination of high magick and high adventure produces dramatic and colorful tales: athletic swordsmen dodge the bolts of sorcerers while performing “impossible” feats of agility and skill; witch-queens transform into dragons, and demons fly from cathedral ruins. The combination of magickal power, dramatic adventuring, political complexity and courtly grandeur is the richest mix possible in the world of *The Sorcerers Crusade*. It’s not always easy to keep in balance, but it’s often well worth the effort.



Of Classic Bits and Clichés

Aramis: *She learned a secret?*

Quenton: *A conspiracy.*

Aramis: *I'm listening.*

Quenton: *To kill the King.*

Aramis: *But that's so dated!*

— Aramis and Quenton, *Revenge of the Musketeers*

Courtly plots in general, and swashbuckling stories in particular, have many standard features that occasionally become outright clichés. Sometimes, these classic bits can be woven into a plot to good effect; players often enjoy seeing them, and they often act as “signposts,” showing the direction of the game and guiding the players’ actions by example. In a high adventure plot, for instance, a last-minute dash to rescue a sacrificial victim or cut a sizzling fuse can be genuinely exciting — and it demonstrates that, yes, this is a game that rewards derring-do. Conversely, such rescues often fail in a tragic plot; the mad dash fails, the heroes stumble over some ludicrous obstacle, and the innocents die — demonstrating that blind mischance is the true god of this world.

As the Storyteller, you’ll face some of your biggest challenges while wrestling with these hoary beasts. Clichés are by definition rather difficult to take seriously, and playing them up soon gets tiresome, even in comedy games. However, these classic bits are overdone for good reasons — they’re exciting, entertaining, even archetypal. They define a genre’s flavor. A swashbuckling tale without a wild sword fight or three simply *wouldn’t* be a swashbuckling tale! Courtly intrigue without a couple of fatal attractions doesn’t feel right at all.

So what can you do? To begin with, vary things a bit if your players can predict what comes next, and do so audibly at every opportunity. (“Oh, yeah. Here comes the ‘climatic-battle-on-the-burning-castle’ bit....”) Swashbuckling adventurers should be encouraged to use the occasional acrobatic stunt in the middle of fight scenes; if, however, they can’t walk into a room without checking for chandeliers and assessing the height of the balcony, the players are probably stuck in a rut. To shake things up, get them fighting in low-ceilinged rooms and the open air a few times, and persuade your players to think of new, original tricks (setting their chances of success charitably high, if necessary).

In a similar spirit, try a new cut with an old blade. Use a classic bit or setting, but vary it just enough that it feels fresh. Is Edward Geisler going to duel Lord Tyburn on a staircase? Cover it with ice, and add a harsh snowfall. Does Kestral need to poison a courtier to get to her target? Make him the nephew of her best friend, who’s secretly working

for the enemy. This way, the scene remains intact, but it doesn’t feel like the same bit you’ve seen a million times before.

For another cliché-wrecking technique, we can look to one of the classics of the genre. Remember the last third of *The Three Musketeers*? The novel? No? Neither does anyone else. Why? Because it’s depressing. Essentially, the cardinal takes revenge for the affair of the queen’s necklace — and he wins. Several characters die, and nearly everyone suffers. While this does tend to take some of the fun out of the story, it points out a simple way to remove some corn from your chronicle: make it dangerous. Make your players sweat. Make things *happen* as a result of the adventure. Without the threat of failure, the plot feels too *easy*. Thus, there should be a real chance that your players will *not* succeed — and potential consequences even if they do. A roleplaying game is not a James Bond movie, after all. If the heroes blow it, they might die. Don’t hold their hands. If a seeming adventure turns out to be a tragedy... well, who’s to say you didn’t have that in mind? This isn’t to say that you should turn a swashbuckling romp into *King Lear*, but let your players think that you just *might*. An element of uncertainty adds flavor to some very stale dishes.

Dances and Duels

Courtly plots usually feature certain “classic scenes” that may or may not veer into cliché, depending on how they’re handled. These bits include:

- **The Monarch Holds Court:** This is what the large hall at the heart of the palace is for: government as a social occasion. A monarch must appear regal to her subjects, so complex shows of pageantry and etiquette have been designed to impress the endless petitioners, diplomats and visitors who enter Her Majesty’s presence.

This scene is designed to be spectacularly intimidating. On her throne, draped in finery and surrounded by attendants, the monarch listens to each point of order, gives some quick response, and moves on to other business while her attendants hustle the visitors along. In a large court, these formalities are so elaborate that anyone who isn’t an experienced courtier winds up totally lost. (Which is sort of the point.) Any visitor with a shred of intelligence knows enough to defer to Her Majesty, but occasionally tempers flare. Every so often, someone steps out line, and either disagrees with the monarch, draws a weapon, or performs some other breach of etiquette. What happens next? More often than not, the monarch has enough savvy to put the offender in his place (see *Shakespeare in Love*). If she loses her temper, though, someone’s heading for the dungeon — or out the window (see any version of *Robin Hood*). If anyone else breaks the peace, he’d better be sure that the monarch agrees with him... or likes him enough to forgive the outburst.

ITEM, FOURTH: HONEYED WORDS AND BITTER POISON

• **The Private Council:** This is where the *real* political plotting takes place — in some private room away from the throne. Everyone in the meeting is assumed to be on the same side, but they often disagree quite strongly about means to the end. There should be lots of dark, pensive stares over goblets of fine wine, witty insults, and great affronts that sometimes lead to bloodshed. If treason is even *hinted* at, everyone will begin assessing everyone else for reliability. Many of Shakespeare's plots are driven by a succession of such scenes, which evoke a sense of barely harnessed hostility and impending disaster. The suspense in these interludes comes not from a bared sword, but from the incredibly high stakes of the meeting.

• **The Entertainment:** While the rich and powerful celebrate, a courtly spectacle turns into entertainment of an unexpected kind. Someone — a gate-crasher, an assassin, an agent of the King — intrudes on the festivities, either with some devastating revelation, comic relief, or a secret that will set the plot in motion. The possible "interruptions" are legion: in *Romeo and Juliet*, would-be enemies fall in love; in "Hop-Frog," a jester enacts a horrific revenge; in *The Three Musketeers*, agents battle over the queen's necklace, while in *Dangerous Beauty* a poetry reading degenerates into a duel. Prince Hamlet uses traveling players to expose his uncle's treachery, while Cinderella wins a prince's heart before vanishing into the night. The planned spectacle sets the scene, but the surprise makes it memorable.

Entertainment scenes are wonderfully colorful — a duel is much more fun when masked combatants fight up and down a banquet table — and they evoke the romance of the period. Appendix II details several different kinds of gatherings, any one of which would make a spectacular background for some clash of arms, wills or magick.

• **The Seductive Offer:** Sooner or later, someone approaches a player's character with a tempting offer: *Do what we request and all this [fill in the blank] will be yours. Resist us, and suffer.* The offer may or may not be magickal, sexual, or financial; it could come from a courtier, a vampire, a monarch, or even a spirit. It might be blackmail, or it could arise from a genuine desire to give the character what he wants. Either way, the stakes are greater than the temptee realizes at the time, and no matter what he does, *someone* is going to be very unhappy.

• **The Brawl:** Once things heat up, a band of rowdies tries to "discourage" the players' characters from their goals. Naturally, the heroes take offense; broken furniture and scattered bodies result. The brawl might be serious, with drawn blades and dead bodies, or it might be a simple romp in which the furniture takes most of the damage. The fight's severity will depend a lot on the theme of the adventure; a comedy might feature a slapstick battle (like the dye-house fight in *The Three Musketeers*), while a tragic romance leaves several main characters dead and others in exile (as in *Romeo and Juliet*).

Like the entertainment scene, the brawl bit relies on



location and timing; simple fisticuffs is boring, but a fight in a burning windmill is another thing entirely. This is where the “swash” part of “swashbuckling” really echoes. Whatever the cause, severity and setting of the fight, it should offer the antagonists lots of things to climb, smash, swing from, and fall off of. (See Appendix I for classic swashbuckling stunts.) In many cases, the players’ characters will beat the living hell out of their foes, but the repercussions might be more severe than anyone realizes at the time. After all, the fatal brawl in *Romeo and Juliet* begins as a “friendly” spat, and the Musketeers make lasting enemies of the cardinal and his guards.

• **The Unearthly Encounter:** Courtly routine is dashed when some uncanny thing — Banquo’s ghost, hunch-backed Quasimodo, the faerie Puck, etc. — sends mortals (and possibly magi) scurrying in all directions. What does this visitor want? What will it do? Again, that depends on the story you have in mind. Either way, this encounter should breed chaos.

This bit ought to be handled with care, especially in *Sorcerers Crusade* games where the players and their Awakened characters may be dangerously blasé about things that are supposed to be uncanny. To preserve the mystery, do not employ “brand names” or offer detailed descriptions of the visitor or its powers. (“Oh, look! That 6th generation Tzimisce just showed up to kick your ass with Vicissitude....”) Rather, emphasize the unnerving aspects of the visitation, describe the visitor in moody but unclear impressions, and whisk the entity away before your players can get too familiar with it. Handled well, this scene can lend atmosphere and unpredictability to an otherwise routine event. The visitor’s presence should linger long after its departure; from this point on, things should take a turn for the weird.

• **Trapped!:** It never fails. No matter how brave or skillful the heroes are, the bad guys always get the upper hand, if only for a moment. More often than not, somebody falls into the hands of Chief Villain Number One. The ship is sinking, the Queen is in chains, and nothing could possibly save the day. Except....

This bit has the unfortunate distinction of being the most soundly mocked genre convention in existence — with good reason. Still, a few last-ditch escapes keep everyone’s blood pumping. No worthwhile victory comes easily! Big brother to the brawl scene (and cousin to the duel), this scene depends on urgency, setting and novelty. Do not play this bit for laughs, or add some cackling villain to the mix, unless you’re deliberately going for comedy (or groans). Run it straight, and let the players know you mean business. The “Classic Settings” sidebar offers a few potential locations to make your players sweat, and Appendix I describes a few stunts they might use to escape. When and if they do, give them a moment to rest before reaching the big climax....

• **The Duel:** When all’s said and done, there’s gonna be a showdown — especially when a player’s character who’s proud of his fencing skill has developed a rivalry with a villain of comparable ability. Traditionally, this is a duel of blades, and there are countless movies illustrating the principles (*Scaramouche* is said to hold the duration record; *Hamlet* excels for treachery). Still, other options exist: a law-court scene (as in *The Merchant of Venice*); a contest of wits, knowledge or ruthlessness (*Elizabeth*); a game of skill (chess, anyone?); or, of course, a magical throwdown (*Dragonslayer*). Either way, the action has to move quickly, and the players must have a real investment in the outcome. The final duel cannot afford to be boring.

Speed is essential during the duel; although you’ll probably want to employ detailed combat rules, use narrative combat (see the rulebook, pp. 193-194) to wipe the floor with minor opponents. Go all-out when describing the action, and encourage your troupe to try wild stunts and energetic roleplaying. Also, give everyone something to do. Although most duels end up as face-offs between two arch-enemies, the other players should have hazards of their own to face. (See the climax of *Cutthroat Island* for an example of several “players’ characters” battling their personal antagonists.) Both sides will be doing their damndest to win, so the fireworks ought to be impressive.

Of People and Politics

*The kingly crowned head, the vigilant eye,
The councilor heart, the arm our soldier,
Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter.*
— William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

Characters, too, can become clichés — if the Evil Advisor practically has a sign saying “Kill me” taped to his chest, there’s something wrong. Of course, these clichés have some basis in commonplace psychology. Courtly life rewards a sharp wit, courtiers tend to be rich and educated, and politics demand ruthless action. Thus, the stereotype of the witty, arrogant, cold-hearted courtier has a lot of truth to it. Even so, it’s not impossible to retain *some* moral sense in that line of work, and many vicious wits refuse to take advantage of inexperienced rivals. By playing up a few notable differences — the nasty aristocrat who’s nice to children, the hearty guardsman who plays melancholy tunes in the barracks — you can redeem the cliché while keeping a classic character-type intact.

This brings us to an important point about the political side of these stories: Politics serve as a means to an end; only lost souls make it an end in itself. Admittedly, it may not always be a *good* end — politicians may well be after power and personal gain — but effective operators don’t lose track of their goals. (Even Machiavelli was trying to teach princes how to be strong so that they could save his country from foreign domination.) This fact, in turn, can add complexity

Classic Settings

The following elements have been brainstormed up (or shamelessly pirated from other sources) to add flavor and excitement to otherwise-mundane scenes. Although the setting should suit the plot, anyone who's seen a swashbuckling film knows the logic that leads characters to these locations can get pretty shaky. Who cares? For extra fun, match a nasty complication (a storm, for instance) or two to a precarious setting (a ship's rigging). Adjust die rolls by increasing or reducing difficulty numbers, then storytell for all you're worth.

Settings

- Archive (library, museum, oracle, etc.)
- Beach (high tide, low tide, heavy surf, storm, rock beach)
- Bridge (stone, wood, ornamental, etc.)
- Brothel, harem, orgy or bathhouse
- Castle ramparts
- Court (throne room, meeting hall, secret passage, "back room," etc.)
- Death trap (pendulum, flooding room, spiked walls, etc.)
- Factory (foundry, dye-house, clockworks, armory, forge, tailor, mint, glassworks, etc.)
- Garden (herbs, flowers, roses, overgrown, magickal, carnivorous plants, sentient, hedge maze, poisonous)
- Graveyard, crypt, tomb or catacombs
- Laboratory filled with hazardous substances
- Mill (wind-, water-, steam-, grinding)
- Moving vehicle (coach, wagon, Daedalean contraption, etc.)
- Narrow, rope or crumbing bridge
- On, in or under water
- Otherworldly passage (Moon Path, Wyck Path, Mists, etc.)
- Riding beasts (horses, griffins, dragons, etc.)
- Ruins (ancient temple, shattered castle, abandoned manor, etc.)
- Sewer, dungeon, torture chamber, mass grave
- Ship (deck, rigging, crow's nest, gun deck, bilge, captain's quarters)
- Stairs
- Tavern (the old standard), banquet hall or kitchen
- Temple, church, cathedral, or other sacred place
- Theatre (on stage, backstage, on catwalk, beneath stage, etc.)
- Tree (branches, large limb, across a fallen log)
- Wine cellar or storage room

Complications

- During a play, party, masque, etc.
- Many characters are in disguise
- Enemy has hostages
- Bad weather (rain, snow, wind)
- Severe storm (thunderstorm, squall, cyclone, magickal tempest)
- Poor footing (mud, ice, crumbling masonry, hot coals)
- Fire (small but spreading)
- Raging inferno
- Flood
- Suffering a Scourging
- Hot pursuit from a dangerous third party
- In path of (or on top of) Daedalean contraption
- Unarmed
- Naked (or nearly so)
- Facing an expert
- Facing an amateur
- Facing an amateur you don't dare defeat (king, princess, child, etc.)
- Facing an Otherworldly being (demon, ghost, spirit, etc.)
- Magickal beast (dragon, griffin, demon) on a rampage

to your stories, especially if there are three or four major factions at the court whose goals aren't *completely* opposed. Look at the basic conflict in *The Three Musketeers*: The King and Cardinal Richelieu have a friendly rivalry, but both want what's best for France. Richelieu hates the Queen, but keeps his personal feelings out of state business. Buckingham loves the Queen, and has great power in England, but he's limited by the political situation there. Most of the major characters in the book's plot are agents of the greater figures, but have personal concerns and objectives that color their loyalty. In short, everybody wants something, and that "something" may even be a common goal. It's the way the courtiers go about getting what they want (or the purposes that drive them to want it) that set the political conflicts in motion.

Item, Second features a selection of classic swashbuckling characters; Item, First shows the dangerous games they play. As a Storyteller, you can prevent these characters from stagnating by giving them something to strive for, a handful of personal quirks, and the occasional secret that keeps your players guessing.

Dangerous Foes, Helpful Friends

By their nature, courtiers face off against formidable enemies. Even if the King or Prince is benevolent, his court includes great lords and expert politicians; these worthies keep an eye out for prospective rivals and alliances, and stash several daggers up their sleeves (literally and otherwise) for unpleasant surprises. These plotters have influence to spare, and they don't tend to be forgiving. Thus, a newcomer to the court has a hard road ahead of her.

Fortunately, there are friends out there who can light the way: patrons who back a courtier's efforts; relatives who support their Awakened kin; shrewd elders who help a newcomer through her early trials; and allies who, for whatever reason, owe a court-bound magus their assistance. In the halls of power, people have long memories — both for insults and for good turns. Many a young courtier has been helped by some servant or lord who felt honor-bound to help her, and many a plot has been ruined by a seemingly insignificant courtier who finally saw his opportunity for revenge come walking down the hallway in the form of a swashbuckling magus.

And then there's the court itself. In most cases the looming halls, gargantuan chambers, elaborate artwork and endless rituals are designed to impress. Few throne rooms are "just" rooms — they're monuments to the vanity and power of the King; and the greater the court, the grander that "monument" will be. Ideally, the physical surroundings of the court — its halls, gardens, chapels, corridors — become characters in themselves. Each room, every garden, assumes its own "personality"; even when a character is alone, she always feels as though she's in the presence of something greater. Mervyn Peake's Gormaghost trilogy excels at this personification — the labyrinthine court-realm literally overshadows the humans within, and broods over their petty intrigues with immortal patience. Every so often, pull back away from the human interactions and describe the court as if it were a character in its own right.

From a Storyteller's perspective, these supporting characters give the swashbuckling adventure its distinction. Fancy stunts are fairly useless unless there's a good story behind them and a cool audience to impress. There is, of course, the danger that such interesting supporting characters will overshadow the players, but that problem is easy enough to address: Never forget that your troupe is the center of this particular tale. The characters may be — and *should* be! — surrounded by greater forces, but their heroism and bravery set them apart.

Every now and then, it's a good idea to take supporting characters out of the picture before the players come to rely on them... or resent them. This "transfer" can be peaceful and temporary (the character goes on sabbatical, attends distant business, or retires), or violent and tragic (she's murdered by an old enemy, stricken with disease, disgraced, or cursed). Either way, the transition offers new plot hooks. Has Caesario's old paramour been exiled? Perhaps he can win her a place in court again. Is Christina's prime contact slain? He won't be the *last* to die, Christina vows....

Sometimes, a supporting character — friend or foe — should simply *disappear*; this is, after all, the mysterious world of court, and magick is everywhere. Such disappearances serve a dual purpose: they remind the players about the high stakes of this deadly game they play; and they offer potential motivation for future adventures.

And then, in a new and ever-changing arena, they can start playing their *own* games at court.



ppendix

*Not without fire can any workman mold
The iron to his preconceived design,
Nor can the artist without fire refine
And purify from all its dross the gold;
Nor can revive the phoenix, we are told,
Except by fire. Hence, if such details be mine
I hope to rise again with the divine
— Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Sun Purified with Passion"*



ppendix: Classic Swashbuckling Stunts

Wild tricks are the hallmark of swashbuckling adventure. Where would d'Artagnan be without a quick feint and a cutting remark? A constant routine of "I attack," "Roll," "I hit!" gets old quickly, and defeats the whole mood. Hence, the following "stunts" — classic bits of derring-do that any swashbuckler can perform... assuming, of course, that he or she has the skills to do so.

Flashy as these classic stunts may be, none of them requires magick. Indeed, a well-timed trick might give a mortal a short advantage over a magus — a scullery maid can bring an Awakened priest to his knees with a good kiss, and a stable-boy can distract a wizard by flinging dung into his face. Even so, a magickal spell can boost the

effectiveness of a given stunt, adding a bit of power or fortune at a critical moment. Naturally, the magus must cast the spell before she attempts the stunt; such things don't simply happen when you're fortunate enough to be Awakened — you have to make them happen! An action-oriented ritual or focus helps immeasurably in this regard; it's a lot easier to use a sword during a duel than it is to kneel and pray. In nearly all cases, these stunts are casual, not vain. For details about magick and mundane rolls, see the rulebook, p. 245, and remember that Arete roll difficulties are limited to modifiers of + or - 3.

The *Sorcerers Crusade* rulebook also describes combat-oriented stunts on pp. 197 and 203. Consider the following bits to be *optional* additions to that menu. In certain grim or low-key chronicles, some of these stunts might seem silly or far-fetched. As always, the Storyteller has the right to disallow anything that might disrupt the mood of the game, or to rule that certain stunts just don't *work* in her world. Naturally, this kind of *pièce de résistance* demands a touch of style; as the wall crumbles or the evil duke stumbles, don't forget to add a witty remark or dexterous flourish as a signature.

The "Dramatic Systems" portion of the rulebook (pp. 190-191) highlights a number of physical and social feats

that seem especially appropriate to courtly adventures. Other good swashbuckling bits include:

• **“Ah! The d’Adeggio Feint! I Know It Well!”:** Hmm... your opponent’s fencing style looks familiar. You, of course, have done a lot of studying in the arts of war (you *are*, after all, a gentleman!), and after a moment you size up the maneuvers your rival has chosen. Now, you might be able to counter them more effectively. If nothing else, you’ll probably impress him by commenting on his form and technique while cutting him to ribbons....

System: An Intelligence + Fencing roll allows your character to recognize his adversary’s style. The difficulty for the roll depends on your character’s fencing expertise. Consider the base difficulty to be 10, minus your character’s Fencing Trait. (A Guildsmen with Fencing 4 would have a base difficulty of 6, for example.) If the Storyteller wants to make life difficult, she might decide that your opponent has studied an especially obscure sword-style, and adjust your difficult upward by 1 or 2. (“*Od’s blood! I’ve never seen that move before!*”)

Note: For chronicles set in the late Renaissance or the Age of Piracy, when fencing texts and schools are more commonplace, the Storyteller may well adjust the base difficulty to 9 or 8, minus the observer’s Fencing rating.

A successful roll allows your character to notice a particular school of fencing, and to comment on it (as Wesley and Inigo do in *The Princess Bride*). For one turn per success, you may also reduce your attack rolls by 1, *so long as you keep fencing with that opponent only*. After that, he learns to compensate for your knowledge, and the two of you are even again. Note that this can be used *against* your character, too! Never underestimate a master.

Magick: A successful Entropy 2 casting allows your character to reduce the difficulty of his attacks by an additional 1 for each success on the Arete roll. (Two successes on the Arete roll, for example, would reduce the attack difficulties by 3.) This adjustment lasts the usual time (one turn/success), but reflects a far greater advantage, as the mage literally turns his rival’s stylistic weaknesses against him.

• **“All For One...”:** Back to back with boon companions, you fight as a single unit, like a tempest of bright steel and sweeping cuts. You all seem to move in unison, covering one another’s flanks and openings as if guided by one mind. Until your ranks break or your enemies lie scattered, the bond between you all continues. When at last the danger has passed, you often celebrate with a familiar chant and hoisted blades.

System: Dexterity + Alertness or Fencing, difficulty 8. A single “spokesman” rolls once at the beginning of combat; each success indicates one turn during which all of the allied characters act, one after another, on the best initiative roll. If that roll botches, or if one ally botches her attack

or dodge roll, the coordination ends and the characters all stand around looking stupid. During that one turn, you may defend, but cannot attack at all.

Magick: Entropy 1 or Mind 2 reduces the difficulty of the stunt roll.

• **...And There Goes the Roof:** At a critical moment, the wall or ceiling gives way. Perhaps a hail of cannon-shot weakens the structure, or a strong gust of wind knocks over the teetering ruin, or the impact of two bodies hitting the roof causes the timbers to snap. In any case, a nearby structure collapses on top of your enemy (or beneath him), dropping him and probably inflicting *just enough* damage to give you the advantage.

System: Storyteller’s option. In most cases, this will happen when and if the circumstances seem fitting. If a player wants to *make* this happen, she should describe what she’s doing (tossing a stone at a weakened support, kicking a wall, etc.), then roll the appropriate Traits. This usually requires a Strength + Athletics roll (Storyteller sets difficulty), although certain other combinations might apply:

— Dexterity + Athletics: Throwing an object *just so*.

— Dexterity + Acrobatics: Leaping aside just in time, or faking your opponent into the trap.

— Manipulation + Subterfuge: Distracting the foe until the structure collapses.

— Dexterity or Strength + Crafts: Hitting the flaw well enough to weaken the structure.

A Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 7) can help the character spot a weak spot — or a collapsing structure — quickly enough to take advantage of it for one turn. If the Storyteller wants to be fair, he can give the enemy a chance to notice the problem, too.

Damage depends on what’s falling, and how far it falls. A tumbling brick wall will probably inflict eight-10 dice of damage in a large, scattered area of effect, while a single falling brick would cause one character five dice of damage. (A falling *gargoyle*, on the other hand, might inflict 10 dice to anyone underneath it.) All damage is normal, unless the collapsing structure is burning, or studded with nails or spikes. If the character(s) falls *through* something, see “Falling” in the rulebook, p. 209.

Oh, and yes, you *can* get creamed by your own trap, too. The Storyteller might require a Dexterity + Athletics or Acrobatics roll from anyone who’s trying to get out of the way in time.

Magick: Entropy 1 or Matter 1 can lower the difficulty of spotting the flaw. Either of those Spheres at 2 lowers the difficulty of exploiting the flaw, while either Sphere at 3 allows the magus to create a new flaw in a previously sound structure.

• **“Back, You Dogs!”:** As the crowd closes in, you bare your teeth and draw your weapon. Stunned by your raw ferocity, the mob hesitates; perhaps they even run away rather than face your fury.

System: Manipulation + Intimidation or Expression. The difficulty of the roll depends on the circumstances, your appearance, and the mob’s courage. A trembling virgin defying some drunken rowdies will have a hard time driving them off; a blood-spattered Pagan, on the other hand, will have angry peasants crapping their trousers before she even says a word.

For rough results, assume the following:

One success	they hesitate a turn or two.
Two successes	they stop.
Three successes	they have second thoughts about attacking.
Four successes	they have <i>third</i> thoughts about attacking, and probably won’t.
Five successes or more	they run like hell.

Note that the difficulty should probably start at 7 and work upward from there. Courage multiplies in numbers. Really impressive... incentives (killing a man with a bare fist, smashing a table, letting your eyes glow crimson) will probably lower the difficulty a bit. If you fail, however, the mob will kick your sorcerous ass, but good.

Oh, and this works only against mortals. Magi and night-folk are far too jaded to be so easily impressed.

Magick: Mind 2 lowers the difficulty of the roll — the magick makes you seem more impressive than you are. Other sorcerous feats might lower the difficulty by scaring the hell out of your foes, but could have the reverse effect,

Dazing (Optional)

In polite company, it’s considered rude (and illegal as hell) to whip out a sword and start killing people without a really good reason. Many times, especially in taverns or courtly settings, it’s wiser to knock a foe unconscious than to run him through. To escape censure (and the gallows), a character might want to use fisticuffs to subdue his enemies, and save the blade for life-and-death affairs.

At the Storyteller’s option, barehanded brawling damage (and damage from “softer” weapons like ale tankards or chairs) can be considered “stunning” rather than fatal. Aside from a bloody cut or two, a character may be struck hard without falling below “Bruised” on the Health Level track. Damage that knocks the recipient to Incapacitated belts him into unconsciousness for a while. Likewise, a single blow that exceeds that character’s Stamina Trait can daze him for a turn or so. (See “Stunning” in the rulebook, pp. 196 and 206.)

Troupes that have adopted the new bashing damage/lethal damage rules presented in the revised edition of *Mage: The Ascension* should consider most of the stunts given in this Appendix to be bashing damage, unless the stunt has some clearly deadly aspect, like fire or a wall of pikes. Either one of these methods offers a courtier an alternative to excessive bloodshed. And that choice might be the only thing that stands between a king’s amusement and his extreme displeasure.

too. A pack of zealots might be that much more determined to throw you in a pyre if you’re obviously a witch.

• **Bait-and-Switch:** While distracting your opponent with a flash of wit (or tit), you sneak an object into your grasp, or out of sight. Ideal for those moments when a dagger is a girl’s best friend.

System: Dexterity + Subterfuge (for a quick grab); Charisma or Appearance + Subterfuge (to distract him with your... charms); or Wits + Subterfuge (to outwit the nitwit). The Talents: *Larceny* and *Seduction* can substitute for Subterfuge. In most cases, the difficulty for the roll would be 5; an especially perceptive or suspicious character might force you to add his Perception rating to your difficulty, at the Storyteller’s discretion. (Deceiving a Perception 4 baron, for example, would be difficulty 9.) This trick only works with objects that can fit into one hand, and that can be easily hidden.

Magick: Entropy 2, Life 2 or Mind 2 lowers the difficulty of the roll. Connection 2 can actually let your character move the filched object elsewhere, or pull one from another location.

• **Carpet-pulling:** Faced with a handful of heavily armed adversaries, you duck down, grab the carpet, and yank. As your opponents tumble, you leap up, draw your weapon, and start swinging....

System: Strength + Athletics, difficulty 6 (possibly higher if the carpet is especially large, or if there are more than three people standing on it). This stunt can only be performed in a turn when your character has initiative over *all* of his opponents, and it requires at least three successes.

If the carpet-pull succeeds, every enemy standing on the rug will teeter or fall to the floor; the Storyteller might make Dexterity + Alertness rolls for those characters (difficulty 6), or she might simply assume they all go down for one turn. For obvious reasons, a carpet-pull must be done in a single turn; no other action may be performed that turn, either. Failure indicates that nothing happened (you pulled, but the carpet didn’t budge), while a botch reflects a comical — and possibly dangerous — blunder. (See Michael York’s fumble during the climax of *The Three Musketeers*.)

Magick: A successful Life spell might enhance the Strength roll (see the rulebook, p. 241). A successful Entropy 2 casting can reduce the carpet-pull’s difficulty by increasing the odds that the adversaries standing on the rug will fall.

• **Chandelier-swinging:** Leaping into space, you seize the chandelier and fly across the room. Do you escape your enemies, or plow right through them? That depends on how high the chandelier is... and on how daring you're willing to be!

System: Dexterity + Athletics or Acrobatics, difficulty 5. The arc of the swing should carry you to some convenient location, whereupon you can let go and run away.

Should you choose to swing out and kick a bunch of adversaries, roll Dexterity + Brawling instead. Difficulty is 7, and each success knocks one enemy off his feet (no damage). If you elect to crash into a single adversary, roll the same attack, and use Strength + 4 dice for the damage. In this case, you take half the damage yourself. For obvious reasons, this damage is normal, not aggravated. This stunt rarely works against skilled or powerful opponents.

Note that a botch during this stunt is disastrous. At the very least, your character misses the chandelier and falls; at worst, he might catch the chandelier and swing full-force into some obstacle — like a wall, window, or wall of spears. (Damage is Storyteller's discretion, and *might* be aggravated.)

Magick: Connection 1 helps you judge the distance to your "swing"; Entropy 2 helps you time your leap for optimum effect. Both Spheres reduce the difficulty of the roll accordingly.

• **Club Meets Brainbox:** At one point or another, every swashbuckler either takes a club upside the noggin, or knocks her enemy out with a lucky blow. This stunt applies in either case, and lets you (or your enemy) knock a foe unconscious without inflicting much permanent damage. (Headaches don't count.)

System: Dexterity + Brawl, difficulty 8; roll five successes or more, and you can knock any human opponent out cold for one turn per success. Inflicts normal club damage + knockout, but doesn't work on really tough adversaries (like werebeasts or mighty enforcer-types), although club damage still applies.

On this particular attack, the "recipient" cannot use his normal soak — this is, after all, a specialized stunt — unless he's using some form of magical protection (Life magick, the Fortitude Discipline, etc.). Helmets might or might not apply (Storyteller's discretion); after all, a bash in the head sets bells ringing whether you're wearing a metal brain-case or not.

Oh, and yes, this can be done with a normal fist, too. (Strength damage, not club.) Anyone who would punch an armored knight in the face, however, deserves the broken hand he'll probably receive.

Magick: Forces 2 or Life 2 adds successes to the attack roll, or to damage if the knockout fails.

"Blade Fodder" and General Action Rolls

Adventure tales assume that important characters, even ones who aren't especially good at fighting, are automatically superior to "blade fodder" — nameless walk-ons whose only real purpose is to make a fight scene more exciting. While a grimly "realistic" story presents every opponent as a potentially deadly threat, the swashbuckling genre is best served by a lighter touch. Here, the hero confronts a mob of armed but faceless adversaries. With a stunning display of bladesmanship (or dumb luck), he wipes the floor with these antagonists... usually in time to cross swords with the true villain and his most competent henchmen.

For such moments, we recommend using the general action rolls described in the rulebook, p. 188. A single resisted Dexterity + Fencing, Melee or Brawl roll should suffice for a quick exchange of blows, with the difficulty set between 7 (for a handful of rowdies) and 9 (for a pack of skilled and determined guardsmen). At that point, use the following guidelines:

- Each player's character in the fight rolls his or her Dice Pool.
- The Storyteller makes a single roll for the enemies, basing their Dice Pool somewhere three and six dice. (If an enemy has a combined combat Dice Pool of more than six dice, he's not "blade fodder"!)
- If there are several players' characters involved, the Storyteller makes one "enemy roll" per player's character.
- If the player's character wins, he scatters his foes. Don't even bother rolling damage — they simply wind up dead or incapacitated on the floor while he goes on to something more important.
- If the "fodder" wins, the player's character suffers some severe but not fatal mishap: he's knocked unconscious, badly wounded, roped and tied, borne down by sheer numbers, etc. If the Storyteller wants to, she might roll a few dice to see how many Health Levels the main character takes in the process. This damage is probably normal, although a torch-wielding mob or a mass of pikemen would inflict aggravated damage instead. In any case, the player's character loses the fight, and winds up in dire straits as a result. (See the battle by the river in the film version of *The Three Musketeers*; Porthos and Athos are dropped by assassins, but do not die from their wounds.)
- The Storyteller and player dramatically narrate the results. ("I leap in, slashing like a demon!" "They try to stop you, but you're far too fast. A couple of quick thrusts and parries, and they're on the run...")

To speed things up, the Storyteller might want to employ a "one-hit rule": Essentially, any "blade fodder" character nailed by a player's character for any amount of damage is immediately removed from the fight. He simply wasn't tough enough to be much trouble!

For our purposes, consider "blade fodder" characters to be living obstacle courses — tavern brawlers, simple guardsmen, Infernal cultists, and so on. They probably don't fight to the death, either. The heroes could simply wound 'em or knock 'em silly in the course of the brawl. Note that "hero" and "player's character" can also refer to important Storyteller characters, like villains. In this case, "blade fodder" might refer to innocent bystanders who are hopelessly outmatched and slaughtered; their deaths give the players' characters an atrocity to avenge.

• **Cracking Skulls:** Seizing two ruffians by the scruff of the neck, you bash their thick skulls together, then let 'em drop to the floor, dazed or unconscious. A useful trick for tall, brawny fellows with little patience for small talk...

System: Strength + Brawl, difficulty 8. Requires at least four successes. Damage is normal (Strength + 2), and both targets take the same amount of it. (Note that both can soak, but it's probably more dramatic if they're simply knocked out.) A single roll takes care of the whole stunt. Your character has to have at least four dots in Strength to pull this off, and should be taller than his adversaries.

Magick: Forces 2 lowers the difficulty for the stunt; Life 3 (or better) can raise your Strength Trait to superhuman levels.

• **Curtain of Blood:** With a flick of a blade or whip, you slash a small but bleeding cut just above your adversary's eyes. As the blood seeps down across his face, you can take advantage of his distress to skewer him... or run.

System: Dexterity + Fencing or Melee, difficulty 8. At least two successes are necessary to blind your foe for a turn; four or more blinds him for two. The "curtain" isn't nearly deep enough to cause Health Level damage, but it halves your opponent's Dice Pools for the duration. (The poor guy is too busy blinking and mopping the blood out of his eyes to concentrate on his swordplay.) Like most other combat tricks, this must be done in a single quick (one turn only) motion.

The "curtain" begins to bother your opponent one turn after the attack succeeds — the blood needs time to trickle down into his eyes. For obvious reasons, this attack is pointless against opponents who don't bleed, or who wear a closed helmet or some other form of face-cover. This "curtain" only works once (per combat) against a given opponent; once he stanches the flow of blood, he'll remain on guard. Later blinding attempts or attacks add +1 to their difficulty — your rival's wise to your tricks now, boy!

Magick: A successful Life 3 spell doubles the bleeding time by thinning the blood. Entropy 2 can lower the difficulty of the attack.

• **Cutting the "Z":** With a flourish, you nick your blade across a fairly flat surface — a wall, a door, a guardsman's chest — cutting just deeply enough to leave a permanent reminder of your skill behind. This trick also works if you're trying to cut away an enemy's clothes, belt or harness; sever a thin rope; or tear a tiny rent in a tapestry, curtain or other soft surface.

System: Dexterity + Fencing, difficulty 7. This trick requires at least two successes, and may require more if the design is especially elaborate, or the target is... uncooperative. Like the Curtain of Blood, this maneuver causes no

lasting damage beyond torn fabric, slight bleeding, or a mild scar. It, too, must be performed in a single turn — extended dice rolls are not allowed, although several cuts may be made in a row if you want to achieve a complicated effect. (See *Swashbuckler* or *The Mask of Zorro*.)

Note that, with the possible exceptions of a dagger and a whip, this trick cannot be performed with any weapon other than a fencing sword. Other blades are far too dull and clumsy to achieve such delicate results. Hence, a character trying to "cut the Z" must have the Fencing Skill (unless she's using either a whip or dagger, in which case she employs Melee instead).

Magick: A Forces 2 spell can guide your blade true, while a Matter 2 Effect can separate the material along the desired lines. Either way, a successful spell reduces the difficulty of the attack roll. A Life 3 spell, on the other hand, can raise a lasting scar from a very minor wound, branding your opponent with your mark forever. (A good way to make new enemies, by the way...)

• **Dosing the Drink:** You would do a Borgia proud. With a quick, subtle motion, you slip open the clasp of a poison ring or vial, dump the contents into a drink, and await the desired effects.

System: Dexterity + Poisons. Under most circumstances, the difficulty is 6; if someone's *expecting* treachery, however, that difficulty becomes the target's Perception + Alertness Dice Pool. (Or the Perception + Alertness of another appropriate character, like a bodyguard or servant.) Note that botching this roll (or even failing it) is a good way to get yourself killed in a *most unpleasant* manner!

Magick: Connection 2 or Mind 2 could baffle a watcher well enough to lower the stunt's difficulty, while Entropy 2 can shift the odds in your favor. Note that neither spell has any effect on the poison itself — they simply help you dose a drink, not strengthen that dose.

• **Head-but:** In tight combat with a desperate foe, you suddenly bash him in the head with... *your* head! Painful, yet effective.

System: Stamina + Brawl, difficulty 7. Damage is normal, Strength + 1. If the damage rolled exceeds *your* Stamina rating, you take half of that damage yourself. Naturally, both parties can soak this damage.

Magick: Life 2 can alleviate the damage your character suffers, or increase his Strength (and skull hardness) to inhuman levels.

• **Fancy Footwork:** Despite some nasty obstacles (ice, slippery floors, scattered debris, etc.), you manage to dance among your attackers while they fumble and flail around you.

System: Dexterity + Athletics, difficulty 7 (possibly higher if the ground is truly messy). Note that your opponents can do this, too. Any character who tries to dance around on difficult terrain must split her Dice Pool between this "trick" and her attack and defense dice.

Magick: A good Life 2 spell can "lend" you a bit of additional coordination, lessening the difficulty of the roll.

• **The Fatal Trip:** As you fight with blades or polearms, you misdirect your opponent with quick feints and swings. Suddenly, you lash out with a foot or weapon, tripping the foe and shifting the advantage to you.

System: Dexterity + Subterfuge, difficulty 7. Damage is normal, Strength + 1 (or weapon damage, if you trip him with a weapon instead of a leg). Three successes or more knock your enemy off his feet for a single turn.

Magick: Mind 2, Entropy 2 or Forces 2 can lower the difficulty of the roll.

• **The Fearless Leap:** *Trapped!* Between freedom and the rack lies a precipitous drop. As the guards close in, you take stock of your situation, decide that foolhardiness is the better part of valor, and jump....

System: Dexterity + Athletics or Acrobatics (Dexterity + Riding if your character's on horseback). Difficulty depends on the distance between your jumping-off point and your destination, as well as on the weight of your possessions (or body) and other burdens. Assume a base of 7 and take it from there.

This trick assumes you're making a desperate leap that no one in her right mind would attempt. Thus, the distance between where you are and where you end up really isn't important, so long as it's less than 20 feet (for a human), or 35 feet (for a horse). If you succeed, your character clears the distance. A failed roll means she *barely* made it; grasping the edge of a nearby cornice or balcony, she hangs out in the open by her fingertips until she can pull herself up and away (raw Strength roll, difficulty 7). If you *botch* the roll... well, splat. (See "Falling" in the rulebook.)

Magick: Connection 1 or Forces 2 can lower the difficulty of the roll. A Life 2 spell, cast before the jump, can increase the distance by 10 feet per success on the Arete roll. (Life 3 is required if you want to cast such a spell on some other party — like your horse.) At this point, however, the magick becomes vain: Surely, no one can leap 50 feet without the Devil's aid!

• **The Flying Tankard:** A favorite trick of tavern brawlers: Simply heft a heavy tankard of ale and let fly at some poor bugger's head. Don't expect him to buy you another drink afterward.

System: Dexterity + Brawl, difficulty 7. Damage is Strength + 1. Rather than computing distance/Strength, just assume that most human characters can wing a mug the length of a tavern room. At the Storyteller's option, an attack that inflicts more than three Health Levels of damage shatters the mug, showering the unfortunate target with beer and ceramic fragments. (Possibly blinding him if you score five successes or more on the attack roll — see "Salt in Your Eye," below.)

Magick: Connection 1, Entropy 2, or Forces 2 can decrease the difficulty of the roll. Flying weapons (tankards included) also make fine "ritual tools" for Forces- or Life-based spells.

• **The Leaping Mount (or Dismount):** Bracing yourself for impact, you jump from some great height and land squarely on the back of your trusty steed. By some miracle, neither you nor the horse seems much the worse for the experience, and you ride off at top speed. With a similar feat, you can leap off the back of a moving horse — possibly landing on the back of another — without breaking every bone in your body.

System: Dexterity + Riding or Acrobatics, difficulty 7 (for heights of 10 feet or less) to 9 (20 feet or more). Leaping from a height of more than 30 feet is a really bad idea; at that point, both the horse and the character take damage as per the Falling Chart. Although this damage is normal, the Storyteller might rule that it cannot be soaked, due to the... er, *sensitive*... areas involved.

Magick: Connection 1, Entropy 2, or Forces 2 can lower the difficulty of the roll. Life 2 (or 3) can help the rider and her horse absorb the impact with little trouble.

• **Lightning Parry:** Surrounded by enemies, you repel all of their weapons in a single sweep, then bring your own blade back around for a good slash. (To watch this trick in action, see Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.)

System: Dexterity + Fencing or Melee; difficulty is 6 + the number of foes parried. The parry automatically blocks all of the enemies' incoming blades. As a general rule, this trick only works with really inferior swordsmen — that is, "blade fodder." It should not work against players' characters, or notable Storyteller ones.

Magick: Connection 2, Forces 2 or Time 3 can reduce the difficulty of this parry. Time 3 also might allow your character to take extra actions, if that spell has been employed.

• **The Quick Fade:** The baron's men are coming! Quickly, you duck behind a tapestry or into the fog. If you're lucky (or just damned good), they might not see you at all....

System: Dexterity + Stealth or Elusion. If your character is being chased by "blade fodder," your difficulty is 4; if the hunters are especially skilled, perceptive or aware (hounds, imps, major characters, etc.), the difficulty is the

best hunter's Perception + Alertness, or Perception + Awareness, whichever is higher.

Some environments, like fog, brambles, and so forth, lower the "fade roll" difficulty at the Storyteller's option. If the pursuers seem determined to catch the magus, use the normal sneaking and spotting rules. (See the rulebook's Dramatic Systems Chart, p. 191.) For simplicity, your Storyteller might just assume that a character with a good Dice Pool (five or more) simply "disappears" without a roll.

Magick: The Arcane Background adds to the "fade" Dice Pool. Mind 2 can misdirect the pursuers, while Forces 2 can bend the shadows into a sort of cloak. Forces 2 and Spirit 3, of course, allow a magus to literally disappear from this plane of existence.

- **Salt in Your Eye:** This literally underhanded trick consists of palming a handful of some abrasive substance (sand, dung, wine, etc.) and tossing it in your enemy's eyes at just the right moment. Although the stuff would probably burn his eyeballs out in "real life," he seems to be clear his vision in a moment or two. Still, this is a handy (if obnoxious) way to get an edge over a superior opponent.

System: Dexterity + Subterfuge, difficulty 9. A successful roll blinds your adversary for one turn per success, and also costs her the next action she might have taken. Until she clears her vision, all of her Dice Pools are halved.

Magick: Connection 2 and Entropy 2 lower the difficulty of the roll. A handful of painful stuff makes an excellent focus for nasty Life magick Effects.

- **"Surely You Are Mistaken, Milord!":** They can only hang you if they recognize you. A few nimble words and soulful glances might just convince that bailiff that you're not the wizard he's looking for....

System: Wits + Subterfuge; could also be Manipulation + Subterfuge (to reflect good lies), Wits + Disguise (to conceal your appearance), or Appearance + Subterfuge (to distract his attention). Assume a difficulty of 4 for the average guardsman; 6 for suspicious hunters; and the questioner's Perception + Subterfuge for important characters.

Magick: The Arcane Background adds to the Dice Pool. Forces 2 shifts the play of light and shadow across your character's face, while Life 2 can alter her bone structure just enough to confuse the hunter. Mind 2, of course, can cloud his judgement, while Mind 3 utterly convinces him of whatever you want him to think.

- **Tossing Tables:** Nothing quite says "Get the hell out of my way" like an oaken table in the face. This barroom favorite requires a bit of strength, but it's pretty impressive.

System: Dexterity + Brawl, difficulty 8. Damage is Strength + 3. A large enough table can hit several targets at

once, and provide cover against incoming attacks. Your character must have a Strength of 3 or better just to shove the table significantly, and might need a 4 or 5 to actually pick it up and throw it.

Magick: Life 3 can boost the mage's Strength to heroic levels, while Forces 2 can add a few dice to the table damage (Storyteller's discretion; for simplicity, we suggest three more dice.)

- **Whiplash!:** With a flick of the wrist, you can snuff a candle, break a glass, or knock a sword out of a man's hand. Best of all, you look good doing so!

System: Dexterity + Melee (whips only), difficulty 8. A successful snap inflicts a small but disconcerting amount of damage on a single tiny object. To lash a weapon out of someone's hand, see the Disarm maneuver in the rulebook.

Magick: Connection 1 lowers the difficulty. Mind 2 can make you seem utterly terrifying (or seductive) when you use this whip. (See also, "Back, You Dogs!")

- **The Winning Kiss:** "No, milady," says the priest. "I cannot. Leave me be!" Desperate, you catch his arm, pressing ever so slightly against his side. He begins to protest, but you lock eyes with him. His voice stills. Slowly, slightly, you part your lips and move toward his own. Despite his vows, he cannot resist. For a tingling, eternal moment, your lips burn together. He responds with a muffled groan, and clasps you to his breast. His determination cracks and crumbles. After far too long a time, you both ease back. He regards you with newfound lust and not a little supplication. "You win, milady," he breathes. "Though I know I shall regret it, I will do as you ask."

System: Manipulation + Seduction; difficulty is the "victim's" current Willpower rating. (Not his permanent Willpower — this tactic often works best after the target has been worn down by other methods.) Success wins a limited amount of loyalty from the target; soon, he'll come to his senses again, so act quickly!

Obviously, it's pretty silly to roll for every kiss your character gives; this "stunt" is best saved for moments when a single kiss can break a person's will and get him to go against his better judgement. The "winning kiss" can be used by (and on) anyone, so long as the two characters have an opportunity (and some willingness) for a lip-lock. Note that while a character can use Charisma in place of Manipulation, Appearance does not apply. Even a beautiful siren can be a lousy kisser.

Magick: Mind magick of 2 or better can reduce the difficulty of the roll. This stunt makes an excellent focus for Mind, Spirit, or Life-based spells. (Normal rolls apply, although the Arete roll difficulty may be reduced by the successes of the kiss itself.)

Swashbuckling Stunts

Combat

Move	Roll	Difficulty	Damage
All For One...	Dexterity + Alertness/Fencing	8	0
...Goes the Roof	Special; see listing	(varies)	(varies)
Club Brainbox	Dexterity + Brawl	8	Knock foe out
Crack Skulls	Strength + Brawl	8	Grab two foes, smash together
Curtain of Blood	Dexterity + Fencing/Melee	8	Blind foe
Cutting "Z"	Dexterity + Fencing	7	Carve pattern
Head-butt	Stamina + Brawl	7	Strength + 1 (plus pain)
Fatal Trip	Dexterity + Subterfuge	7	Strength + 1/weapon damage
Flying Tankard	Dexterity + Brawl	7	Strength + 1
Lightning Parry	Dexterity + Fencing/Melee	6+	Deflect many blades
Salt in Eye	Dexterity + Subterfuge	9	Blind foe
Whiplash	Dexterity + Melee	8	Break object

Social Tasks

Stunt	Roll	Difficulty	Effect
"Ah... Feint!"	Intelligence + Fencing	10 - Fencing	Recognize style
"Back, Dogs!"	Manipulation + Intimidation/Expression	7+	Foes hesitate
Bait-and-Switch	Dexterity + Subterfuge; Charisma/ Appearance + Subterfuge; or Wits + Subterfuge	5+	Distract foe, palm object
Dose Drink	Dexterity + Poisons	6+	Poison drink
"...Mistaken, Milord"	Wits + Subterfuge; Manipulation + Subterfuge; Wits + Disguise; or Appearance + Subterfuge	4/6/Perception + Subterfuge	
Winning Kiss	Manipulation + Seduction	"victim's" current Willpower	"Victim" breaks

Athletic Feats

Stunt	Roll	Difficulty	Effect
Carpet-pull	Strength + Athletics	6	Topple enemies
Chandelier-swing	Dexterity + Athletics/Acrobatics	5	Swing
Fancy Footwork	Dexterity + Athletics	7+	Stay on feet
Fearless Leap	Dexterity + Athletics/Acrobatics	7+	Escape
Leaping Mount/Dismount	Dexterity + Riding/Acrobatics	7	Jump on or off mount
Quick Fade	Dexterity + Stealth/Elusion	4+	Hide
Tossing Tables	Dexterity + Brawl	8	Strength + 3

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